

Backstabbed in a **Backwater Dungeon**:

My Trusted **Companions** Tried to **Kill** Me, But Thanks to the **Gift** of an

UNLIMITED ∞ **GACHA**

I Got

LVL 9999

Friends and Am Out For **Revenge**

on My **Former** Party Members

and the **World**

Story
Meikyou Shisui
Illustration
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Chapter 1: Sasha and Her Fiancé

The afternoon sunlight dappled through the trees onto an attractive elf couple who were sitting across from each other at a porcelain-white table on the lawn. With a maid waiting on the elves, the two took sips from their teacups in a refined manner and engaged in conversation that was every bit as pleasing to their palates as the tea.

“And Light looked absolutely crushed when he found out we’d tricked him all along,” Sasha said to her companion. “He tried to run away, but one of my arrows stopped him in his tracks. Then he started bawling ‘You’re fakes! You must be fakes!’ Oh, darling, the expression on that inferior’s face was the most disgustingly pained one I’ve ever seen, yet at the same time, I couldn’t help but clutch my sides from the hilarity of it. I wish you could have been there with me to see it, Sir Mikhael.”

“Miss Sasha, it’s always such a gas hearing that story, no matter how many times you retell it,” Mikhael said with a heartfelt smile on his face. “I wish I’d had the opportunity to see the face of that foolish inferior once he realized all of you had deceived him. My fellow knights and I occasionally go around razing inferior villages to the ground, killing all inferior travelers we meet on the way, as well as any other inferiors who witness us in the act and make a run for it. You are quite right when you say those *creatures* look uglier than normal when they are begging for their lives in the moments before we slaughter them. But they look so clownishly ugly, they make us laugh rather than cringe.”

“I know! I can almost see the faces of those inferiors now!” said Sasha. “Light looked downright ghastly the moment before we killed him, yet I couldn’t contain my laughter!”

Mikhael—Sasha’s fiancé—was a member of the Elven Queendom’s royal family, though he was also the vice-commander of the White Knights, the nation’s most elite order. He kept his blond hair neatly trimmed and wore glasses that gave him a rather gentle, handsome look. Although Mikhael had the aura of an intellectual, he also had broad shoulders and a solid build befitting a White Knight officer. Put simply, he was a warrior-scholar of sorts.

Sasha and Mikhael shared a deeply held bond when it came to discussing how hilariously repulsive humans looked when on the

brink of being slain, and they talked about it in much the same way as people exchanging thoughts on a comedy revue they'd enjoyed. Although the elves certainly made a beautiful couple to look at, their topic of conversation was unequivocally hideous. Yet Sasha and Mikhael both shared such a giddy appreciation for human suffering, the subject was always broached whenever they met for tea like this.

This "Light" Sasha mentioned was the same human boy her former adventuring party—the Concord of the Tribes—had duped into joining their ranks three years prior. Boasting a member from each of the nine races, the party had spent the following three months secretly investigating whether Light could be a "Master," since he possessed magical abilities. The powers-that-be ultimately determined Light wasn't a Master because his magical Gift—the Unlimited Gacha—produced nothing but junk items. Consequently, the order was sent down for the Concord to kill Light as a precaution, so the party tricked Light yet again, this time making him follow them into the Abyss, the world's largest and deadliest dungeon. Once inside the dungeon, they attempted to assassinate Light, but the boy somehow managed to escape their clutches. Or to be more precise, Sasha embedded an arrow in one of Light's legs, rendering him unable to run, and Garou the wolfman was just about to eviscerate the boy with his gauntlet-style blades when at the very last moment, the young human's hand accidentally touched and activated a teleportation trap, which sent him to some other part of the Abyss.

The Concord searched every corner of the dungeon—aside from the most dangerous, practically impassable areas—but they weren't able to find hide nor hair of Light. However, it remained an irrefutable fact that a human child who was unable to walk or run due to having an arrow through their leg had teleported to another part of the Abyss. The only fate that awaited Light was for a monster to catch the scent of his blood and devour him. The whole of the Concord agreed with the assumption that Light had died not long after being teleported, so they reported back to the higher-ups. On hearing the party's account, the officials determined that there was little to no chance that Light could have survived, and wrote the boy off as deceased.

As her reward for disposing of a potential Master, Sasha got engaged to Mikhael. She also received a hefty sum of money that would guarantee her a life of opulence for the rest of her days. One slight downside was that Mikhael would never ascend to the throne due to the fact that the Elven Queendom was ruled exclusively by women, but nevertheless, he was still of royal blood.

On hearing about her newfound wealth and upcoming marriage into the royal family, Sasha's family finally warmed to her after a

lifetime of estrangement. Every time Sasha thought about their sudden change of heart, she had to hold her sides to suppress her laughter.

“Oh gracious, your company is so delightful, I always lose track of time,” said Mikhael, who got up from his chair to signal that this little tea party was over. The elf gazed at Sasha through his glasses and extended a genteel hand to her. Sasha responded by looking longingly into Mikhael’s handsome face as she felt her cheeks glow crimson. She took her fiancé’s hand and allowed him to help her to her feet, where she stood alongside him.

Mikhael lovingly clasped Sasha’s hand in his, a princely smile lighting up his face. “I’m so lucky to have met you, Miss Sasha. Before our paths crossed, I found it exceedingly difficult to find any lady who would engage in such stimulating conversation with a brutish knight such as myself. I sincerely believe we are meant for each other.”

“I also feel very lucky to be your wife-to-be, Sir Mikhael,” Sasha replied, returning his meaningful gaze. “I’m so elated, this all feels like a dream.”

“You stole the words straight from my hungry lips, my dear,” he said with a glint in his eye.

“My goodness, Sir Mikhael,” she replied bashfully.

Mikhael escorted Sasha to her horse-drawn carriage, though it was evident the pair didn’t want their tryst to end. Mikhael remained rooted to the spot as he watched the carriage go, until it finally disappeared over the horizon. Sasha also continued to wave at her fiancé through the carriage window until he was no longer visible. Although their engagement had been arranged by the queendom as part of Sasha’s reward, the two appeared to be the perfect couple.

As the carriage proceeded through the streets of the queendom’s capital, Sasha chatted away to an elf maid in her employ, with the occasional blissful sigh punctuating the conversation. “Sir Mikhael was so wonderful today,” she cooed.

“Yes, I’m extremely envious that you are betrothed to him, milady,” the maid said without missing a beat. “You and Sir Mikhael are such beautiful people, and the two of you seem perfect together.”

Sasha giggled, tickled by her maid’s flattery. “Why, thank you. Hearing you say that makes all the effort I put into becoming the ideal woman for him worth it.”

Sasha had gone to great lengths to make herself as beautiful and refined as she could be in preparation for her marriage to Mikhael, but most of her effort had been focused on raising her power level. When she first met her fiancé, Sasha had been hovering around Level 300, while Mikhael’s power level had exceeded 2000, which meant Sasha had to do something to close this sizable gap between them. For the past three years, she had been unable to tie the knot with Mikhael due

to the difference in their power levels. During that rather lengthy time period, Sasha had shed blood, sweat, and tears, eventually reaching Level 500 (give or take), and the queendom had deemed this level suitable enough to fully sanction the union between Sasha and Mikhael.

“You have most certainly pushed yourself beyond your limits for Sir Mikhael, milady,” said the maid. “Even though there is much still left to be done to prepare for the event itself, it warms my heart to know that, at the end of this year, you will be wed.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, shall we?” Sasha cautioned. “The wedding is still a long way off.”

“Milady, if you don’t watch out, the day of the wedding will be on you before you know it,” warned the maid. “I don’t want to hear you can no longer fit into your wedding dress because your waist has ballooned outward.”

“Now you’re just being rude. That’s never going to happen,” Sasha replied, before her attention was drawn to the fact the carriage she was in had started juddering. “Hm? Why are we stopping all of a sudden?”

The driver of the halted carriage hollered down to Sasha, “Some inferior was loading stuff onto a carriage in front of a store, but he let everything collapse and it’s blocking our way.”

“Unbelievable...” Sasha breathed.

An unforeseen accident was delaying Sasha’s trip home after her visit to Mikhael’s. The elf peered out the window and got visual confirmation that a bunch of items had indeed toppled from another carriage that was standing in front of a merchant’s store, and as her driver had said, the goods were strewn across the road, preventing her own carriage from going anywhere. An elf from the store in question was whipping the human slave that had caused the accident.

“You *useless* sonuvabitch inferior!” he roared at the human. “Reload those goods on the double!”

“F-Forgive me, master,” the slave said weakly. “I’m tired from all the work I’ve had to do. If I could just have a little time to rest—”

“Talking livestock don’t get to ask for breaks!” the elf roared. “Now get to work!”

The shopworker continued to whip the slave, who was curled up on the ground. None of the elves watching the scene felt the slightest bit of sympathy for the human. To elves, humans were merely slaves that could be bought cheaply, so their impression of this scenario was closer to seeing a handler correcting a wayward draft animal.

In the Human Kingdom, ninety percent of the subjects were peasant farmers, and because the kingdom mostly exported farm produce and little else, farmers faced a perpetual buyer’s market and

never made much money. As such, poverty was widespread and families were forced to sell any children they couldn't feed into slavery. In addition to this, many adult humans found themselves trafficked out of the kingdom in the same fashion due to this, that, or the other. Most elves looked down on humans because they exhibited the fewest abilities of all the nine races.

Even Sasha's elf maid sighed with contempt at the sight. "Honestly, this is why they're called 'inferiors.' What other race is too stupid to load goods onto a carriage?"

"Not to mention, they're too ugly and filthy for words," Sasha added.

If by chance, Light had been a real Master, I would've been forced to lure him into the queendom's sphere of influence by seducing him. That would've meant letting a stupid, repulsive inferior have his way with me! Sasha thought with a shudder. *Just thinking about it makes me nauseous. I'm so glad Light was the real "fake," and a dead one at that.*

Thanks to Light's demise, Sasha and Mikhael got engaged, and because Light ended up not being a Master after all, Sasha was on the verge of attaining the happiness she had strove for all her life.

At the very least, I should thank that inferior for my new life, Sasha thought. *Garou got caught up in wondering what a Master was, like the idiot he is. Who wastes their time thinking about meaningless nonsense like that, anyway? The only thing that matters to me is that I'm happy. I simply don't get that stupid beastman.*

Sasha continued to reminisce about Garou, who she'd heard was the favorite to become the next chief of the wolfmen. *I bet he's still spending all his time drinking and womanizing, like he used to when we were in the Concord of the Tribes.*

Sasha giggled at this highly plausible conjecture. While she was preoccupied with recalling events from three years prior, out of the corner of her eye, she spied a very familiar figure trying to look inconspicuous in a shadowy alley across the street. The figure quickly disappeared out of view. Sasha automatically turned to focus on the spot where she had seen the figure.

A short child with black hair, Sasha thought. *Was that a human boy? And he looked almost like...* An overwhelming psychological shock that felt like a blow from a blunt object reverberated through Sasha before she could finish her thought.

"I'll make a detour to get around this mess, so sit tight till I've maneuvered us around—milady?!" the driver suddenly yelled out at Sasha, who ignored his protests and jumped out of the carriage.

"M-Milady?" the maid called after her.

Sasha ran clutching the hem of the dress she'd picked out specially for her visit to Mikhael's. She dashed across the road without looking

to get to the alley where she'd seen the boy, her reckless action drawing a scream from the people in an oncoming carriage that didn't miss her by much. She completely ignored the commotion she'd caused and kept on running.

"Milady! You'll hurt yourself!" the maid shouted after her. Sasha pretended not to hear her as she bounded into the alley in her full-length dress.

"You're kidding me. You've *got* to be kidding me, right?" Sasha muttered, her face pale. "It *can't* have been Light! I must be seeing things!"

In spite of her verbal denials, Sasha felt frantically compelled to find out who exactly she had seen standing in the alley, but when she reached it, she found the passage completely empty. Sasha had been a skilled tracker in her adventuring days, though, and she picked up the faint sound of unseen footsteps making their way down an adjoining alley. The elf followed the sounds like a bloodhound that had picked up the scent, and even though she was wearing a formal dress, she was swifter than most ordinary males, due to her power level being north of 500.

When Sasha turned the corner, the footsteps suddenly disappeared. It was like she was chasing a ghost. "What? A dead end?" she murmured. "And I don't see anywhere someone could hide either..."

Sasha scoured her surroundings with her eyes, using every ounce of her scouting expertise to try to pinpoint even a whiff of this mystery boy, but there was absolutely nowhere the boy could be concealing himself in this dead-end alleyway. The area was free of trash, and any reasonable person could see at a glance that there was no possible hiding place here. Sasha kept turning her head this way and that to make sure she hadn't missed anything, and that familiar act helped her to slowly regain her composure.

"Was I really just seeing things?" Sasha asked herself. "I-I must have been. Light was a Level 15 inferior. There's no way in hell he could've escaped the Abyss alive. And besides, it's been three years now. He should've grown older since I last saw him."

If Light *had* survived his ordeal, he would've been a fifteen-year-old adolescent at this point. It was ludicrous to think he'd stay a small boy. Puberty would've made him taller, more muscular, and more masculine-looking.

"Why would I even think he's still a twelve-year-old?" Sasha thought aloud. "That delightful tea date with Sir Mikhael and my reminiscing about the Concord of the Tribes must have made me mix up another inferior kid with Light."

By this point, Sasha had completely convinced herself that she'd

been worrying over nothing, though this theory did require her to passively ignore how a human child could have seemingly slipped out of this back alley at a speed that surpassed her own Level 500 abilities. Just as she was starting to calm down, Sasha finally spotted the piece of paper affixed to the wall in front of her. It had previously escaped her notice because buildings in the Elven Queendom were typically painted the same shade of white as the paper, and also because Sasha had been specifically on the lookout for a human boy. Sasha covered her mouth with a trembling hand and slowly walked up to the piece of paper to get a closer look at it.

Meet me at the Great Tower.

Light

Sasha let out a bloodcurdling scream as she realized the past had finally caught up with her.

Chapter 2: Sasha's Past

Sasha's father, the head of the Lockette family, was an unlanded aristocrat (although an elven noble typically oversaw a fiefdom, one could still attain this status if they held certain positions in the court of law, in the government, or as a high-level bureaucrat) who started an adulterous affair with a commoner and ended up impregnating her. That commoner gave birth to Sasha, and both were given a room in the Lockette estate. But due to their different social stations, Sasha and her biological mother had a horrible relationship with the matriarch of the household, the wife of Sasha's father. The influence of their aristocratic mother also meant Sasha's half sisters treated her and her mother as lesser beings, and throughout it all, Sasha's father turned a blind eye to their ceaseless antagonism.

Sasha's half sisters would laugh at her if they passed each other in the hallways, or splash water at her, or surreptitiously commit random acts of violence against her, out of sight of anyone who might possibly intervene. Each time, Sasha would run crying to her mother, but as they were both powerless to do anything about this treatment, the little girl would always receive the same reply: "Just bear it."

Sasha's mother willingly put up with the abuse until an illness claimed her life, her passing meaning she left behind an illegitimate child with no loving parent. Sasha's mistreatment escalated until she reached adulthood, at which point, she was driven from the estate. However, banishment from that household had been the best possible outcome for Sasha. She'd wanted to become emancipated and escape that hellish environment much sooner, but her father wouldn't allow it, since he'd softened public perception of his infidelity by pledging to raise Sasha until she was of age.

After being kicked out, Sasha supported herself by becoming an adventurer specializing in scouting, drawing on the skills she had developed while living at the Lockette estate. Sasha had managed to survive her childhood by avoiding practically all contact with her father's wife, her half sisters, the callous servants, and all her other tormentors there. She had accomplished this feat by constantly scanning for their presence, and by holding her breath and concealing herself whenever they were nearby. Sasha's gifts helped her to reach C-rank in near record time, and even though she found herself in mortal danger countless times while on quests, it was a thousand

times better than living at the Lockette estate and putting up with the scorn and abuse that was rife within its walls. Sasha became known as something of a wunderkind among adventurers, which opened the door to a top-secret offer she found hard to refuse.

“Search for a Master?” she asked. “And then, if the situation demands it, inveigle him?”

“Yes, Miss Sasha. We require your skills as an adventurer, as well as your beauty. It would please this nation greatly if you could lend us your strength.”

This fateful conversation took place in a private room at the most expensive restaurant in the city where Sasha was active at the time. A seemingly friendly elf—who claimed to be an emissary from the queendom—was the one delivering the message. Her mission would be to find someone with the potential to be a Master, and then contact the authorities, who would launch an investigation into them. The preference among elves to have Masters join their bloodlines ran strong, so the queendom assigned Sasha to this task and instructed her to use her captivating looks and womanly wiles to do whatever it took to bring the Master over to their side.

When this proposition was first put to Sasha, her face scrunched up in abject disgust. *Why are they telling me to physically seduce an inferior?* she thought. Even for an elf, Sasha was extremely prideful—a temperament she’d developed after enduring withering contempt at the Lockette estate for all those years. Her consummate arrogance normally wouldn’t allow her to sleep with a human, even if it *were* in service to her nation, but the terms of the assignment the emissary presented her with at the restaurant changed the calculation in her mind.

“This would be your compensation for successful completion of this mission,” he told her.

“What?! Is all of this *real*?” What shocked Sasha the most was reading the words “marriage into the royal family.”

The specifics of it were thus: if Sasha were to find a real Master and have a child with him, that offspring would marry into the royal family of the Elven Queendom. If Sasha found a Master, but the queendom ended up having the Master snatched out from under its nose by another nation, Sasha herself would be guaranteed a marriage to a member of the royal family. In other words, if Sasha gave birth to a daughter in either scenario, that daughter—or possibly, her daughter’s daughter—could very well ascend to the throne of the queendom.

Aside from that, the emissary detailed some other potential rewards that were just as preposterously generous—so much so, in fact, that they made Sasha gulp unwittingly. *I don’t have much of a*

future if I carry on this adventurer life, she thought. I'll never get the last laugh over my malicious sisters, their mother, and that wretched father of mine who abandoned both me and my mom. But if I complete this assignment...

Sasha had been presented with a chance to become a part of the royal family and potentially give birth to a future queen, which would grant her a social standing that would see her tower over the unlanded Lockettes, and thereby erase her dark past. If all went well, Sasha would become several degrees more powerful than her estranged family. Nothing could surpass such an intoxicating coup, and Sasha was sure the wine she would sip on the occasion of her triumph would be the sweetest thing she would ever taste in her life.

If Sasha remained as an adventurer, none of that would happen. After some hesitation, she finally blurted out her answer. "I-I'll do it! Please give me this assignment!" And so began a new chapter in her life as a member of the Concord of the Tribes.

Masters were rare, and nations expended a lot of resources into finding these individuals. But if Sasha were being totally honest, she'd only taken on this top-secret assignment as a desperate, last-ditch effort to attain status. There were other organizations out on the hunt for Masters too, and they mostly got broken up after ten years if they still hadn't found one—though the longest she'd heard of a group existing without turning up a Master was thirty years. Former members of those luckless groups were given a little bit of hush money after the fact. Although Sasha was largely hopeful that her new party would succeed in finding a Master, she was also prepared for failure.

But after a few years of searching, the Concord of the Tribes did hit upon a potential Master: a boy named Light. Before their encounter, Light was eking out a living by performing frequently dirty odd jobs, such as selling firewood, gathering medicinal herbs, trapping mice that were running amok in storehouses, cleaning out drainage channels, and carrying baggage. The Concord was able to entice the boy to join their party, but in the end, the secret investigation into him determined that Light was not a Master.

Once the Concord of the Tribes had returned from carrying out their orders to dispose of Light, the queendom rewarded Sasha with a handsome sum of money and the announcement of her engagement to Sir Mikhael. Although Mikhael couldn't be said to be an immediate relation to the Queen, he was still of royal blood, and as his betrothed, Sasha had officially become part of the same household that was headed by a count with a higher social standing than her father. *And to think, they used to curse me and call me a "commoner's daughter" and a "bastard child,"* Sasha thought gleefully.

On hearing of Sasha's betrothal, her entire estranged family instantly started cozying up to her. Sasha's father wished to advance his career, while her half sisters and their mother hoped Sir Mikhael could help to arrange marriages for them with other blue bloods. This complete volte-face came in spite of long years of abandonment, contempt, and outright bullying at the estate.

"How can Light still be alive?" Sasha said to herself as she arrived home after receiving his missive to her. "This can't be happening. If this were to become common knowledge..."

Sasha owed her current fortunes to the Concord of the Tribes' testimony that they had killed Light. If the ruling elite were to find out that Light was still alive and kicking, they would wrest the entirety of her reward from her helpless hands. They would cancel her engagement to Sir Mikhael and kick her out of the count's estate, where she was residing. And of course, Sasha would have to pay back the reward money—much of which she'd already spent—which would leave her drowning in debt. Most importantly of all though, the Lockettes would once again shun Sasha and turn their backs on her.

"No! This can't be happening to me!" Sasha yelled once she'd holed herself up in her private room. "I can't have them spitting on me again! I can't go back to being an adventurer just to pay off some massive debt! Why couldn't that brat die like he was supposed to?!"

Sasha's shoulders rose and fell with each ragged breath she took, and by this point, her hair was a total mess. She chewed her thumbnail as she tried to come to a decision on what she should do.

"Should I contact the other members of the Concord of the Tribes? No, I absolutely can't risk this getting out, in case the queendom gets wind of it. Which means I'll have to kill Light with my own two hands and make *sure* he's dead this time. I'm over Level 500 now, so it should be easy enough for me to get it done. I'll decapitate him, grind his head and body into mincemeat, and feed him to the monsters. I'll run him through and make sure he doesn't come back alive this time. Next time I lay eyes on him, the only thing he'll be reborn as is monster feces!"

However, there was one gaping flaw to her plan. "But where the hell is this 'Great Tower'? Where is it?!" Sasha yelled, nearly ripping out clumps of her hair. "At least leave a map for me, you stupid inferior!"

In all her years of questing, Sasha had never even heard of a "Great Tower," and no building matching that description was anywhere to be found in or around the capital of the queendom, where she lived. Sasha briefly wondered if the term "Great Tower" might be some sort of code, but it wasn't one she was familiar with, and the text was too short to function as a code anyway.

“I’m supposed to go to a ‘Great Tower’ if I want to kill Light, but why?!” Sasha yelled, tugging at her hair in frustration for the umpteenth time that day.



“Welcome home, Blessed Lord Light.”

“I’m back, Ellie. Sasha read the note I left her.”

Using the SSR Teleportation card, I departed from the Elven Queendom and materialized in my office in the Abyss, where I encountered one of my lieutenants, the Forbidden Witch Ellie, who was waiting there for me. She greeted me with a curtsy, doing her usual thing of holding her witch’s hat with one hand while clutching the hem of her bicolored skirt with the other. We’d received intelligence some time ago that Sasha—the elf who had betrayed me—would be taking tea with her fiancé on this day, and I’d decided it would also be the day that I would briefly show myself to Sasha on her way back home. That simple act had lured her into the blind alley where I had affixed a message to the wall for her. I’d then activated my SSR Conceal card so that I had a front-row seat from which I could secretly revel in the look on Sasha’s face as she desperately searched for me, as well as when she screamed after reading the note. However, it took all of my self-control and more to resist the temptation to deactivate my Conceal card and slaughter Sasha right there and then.

“I was also able to see that treacherous elf through your eyes, Blessed Lord Light, and everything was so deliciously perfect,” Ellie gushed. “From that very first moment when she spotted you to the one where she saw the message you had left for her, you were absolutely amazing in how you made sure everything played out as intended! I cannot emphasize enough how exquisite the timing of your momentary reveal to her was!”

“That was only because her carriage happened to stop at that particular spot,” I replied. “My original plan was to cross the street in front of her carriage. If anything, we should thank that poor slave who got whipped for that mountain of stuff collapsing on him.”

I had no hand in the goods falling off that carriage. It had been a complete accident. The only way we intervened in the situation was to make sure nothing could block the entrance to the alleyway. Because the spillage into the road had stopped her carriage, I was able to flit in and out of her field of vision in such a way that I knew she would spot me. At first, I thought I would need to grab her attention by walking in front of her carriage—or at least, alongside it—but that fleeting glimpse of me in the alleyway was a lot more effective at drawing her toward the message I’d left for her. At the same time, my mission didn’t allow me enough leeway to save that human slave from being

whipped, and that didn't sit right with me. On hearing my misgivings about failing to save the man from his lashings, Ellie brought her hands up to her mouth, her eyes moist with tears.

"Ah, Blessed Lord Light," said Ellie. "To think you would grieve for a human you've never even met before! You truly are a saint among saints." A serious look appeared on her face. "Coincidental as it may have been, that slave contributed to our project. I will personally make arrangements for him to be set free. I will also be sure to end the life of that awful elf who whipped the unfortunate man."

"Uh, killing the elf would be going too far," I replied. "That is, as long as he's willing to let the slave go."

"Of course, Blessed Lord," Ellie said, curtsying deeply. "Your wish is my command."

With my guilt over the slave addressed, I moved on to my next barrage of questions. "So Ellie, are you sure the message 'Meet me at the Great Tower' will work? I delivered it just like we planned, but don't you think it's a little *too* short? Shouldn't we have made *sure* she walks straight into our trap by leaving her a longer message? Are you totally sure she'll come to kill me herself and not just ask the queendom to do it for her?"

"Well, on the message, I kept it short and sweet, because I thought it best to avoid giving away too much information," Ellie replied. "And besides..."

She paused and flashed the cutest, most bewitching smile at me. It was the kind of smile that didn't just have the ability to make a man fall in love with her; no, that smile had the power to make the man it was aimed at sacrifice his own life, as well as the lives of others, if doing so ensured he would win Ellie's heart.

"The 'Great Tower' has yet to appear on the surface world. I'm willing to bet that treacherous elf is losing her mind right now wondering where the tower is. I want her to feel the pain, disgrace, and humiliation you felt three years ago, and I will use every dirty trick in the book to make sure that happens."

"I get it now. That's brilliant, Ellie," I said. "We're attacking her psychologically by being so vague about the location. Just imagining what Sasha's going through right now makes me so gleeful, I feel like I'm about to burst."

"Thank you very much, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said, and while she still had a serene look on her face, my compliment had caused her knees to shake with joy. It was pretty clear just from looking at her that Ellie was concentrating hard on making sure she didn't slump weakly yet blissfully to the floor.

"I also believe Sasha won't tell anyone else—particularly the authorities—about the message," Ellie continued, still valiantly

upright. “For one thing, she lives too far away from her former party members to summon them to her side, so it follows that she must be preparing to kill you herself. And she’s even willing to run headlong into a trap to make sure you’re dead, even if it means diving into the open mouth of a dark lord and certain death. I mean, after all, no human or elf would give up a happy and fulfilling life they’ve managed to secure for themselves.”

Ellie punctuated this statement with another smile that seemed to come from the bottom of her heart. “I’ll make sure the treacherous elf Sasha suffers before finally dying of madness. By the end, she will know in the core of her being just how much she betrayed and hurt you. I won’t allow her to die a quick death. Oh, no, no. I’ll put her through hellfire and she will wish for death, but death will not come.”

I responded to Ellie’s smile with one of my own. “That sounds perfect, Ellie. In that case, I’ll leave you in command of this operation. I’m counting on you.”

“Of course! I’ll handle everything!” said Ellie, who was beaming brighter than the surface-world sun after my vote of confidence. “I promise you’ll be pleased—or rather, *more* than pleased—with how this all turns out!”

And with that, we officially put the revenge plot against Sasha into motion.

Chapter 3: The White Knights

If you asked a hundred people which order of knights was the strongest in the Elven Queendom, all one hundred would name the White Knights. There were other knight orders in the queendom, of course, but the White Knights were in a league of their own.

There were six official members of the White Knights in total. It was said that together, they wielded a military might equivalent to—or perhaps even more than—all the other knights in the queendom combined. It went without saying that they were the absolute elite of the elites. At this particular moment in time, five members of this supreme fighting force were having tea on the lawn in front of the exclusive billet their order had been provided with.

The White Knights' commander, Hardy—an imposing man with closely cropped blond hair who had the kind of presence you'd expect of a battle-hardened warrior—silently sipped his tea. While he was presently seated, he usually towered over others, his height in excess of 190 centimeters, which served to accentuate his lean, muscular physique. Like most male elves, he was quite handsome, though his aura was quietly intimidating. These qualities meant any woman meeting him for the first time was more likely to feel cautious trepidation than butterflies in her stomach.

Sitting with Hardy at the table on the lawn was Sharphat, the White Knights' marksman, whose personality was the diametric opposite of the stern commander. At this particular moment in time, he was openly canoodling with a human woman, who was sitting on his lap.

“Soscha, sweetheart,” Sharphat said to her. “Did ya know you’ve got the *awesomest* tits ever?”

“J-Jeez, we can’t fool around *now*, Sir Sharphat,” the human woman replied coyly.

Sharphat was quite a bit shorter than his commander, though he was still over 180 centimeters tall, and he had long, flowing hair, some sections of which were braided into plaits. Everything about the way he looked and behaved marked him out as a shallow womanizer, but he managed to get away with his philandering due to his stunning looks that left most other elves in the shade. In fact, Sharphat was so captivantly handsome, any woman would normally revel in catching his eye, though instead of being delighted, Soscha looked sickened

through it all.

Despite Soscha's protests, Sharphat continued to fondle her supple breasts and thighs as he addressed Hardy. "You heard the news, chief? That legendary jackass Kyto was found killing adventurers in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon."



Hardy's initial response to this was silence, but before he could formulate a proper reply, muffled screams interrupted their discussion. The twins, Nhia and Khia—the two junior members of the White Knights—had tied a male human slave to a tree trunk and were using him as target practice for their knife throwing.

“Nhia, check it out! I got him in the leg!”

“That's nothing, Khia! I sliced off his whole ear!”

Because the two brothers had gagged the slave, all the man could do was writhe about in pain and scream into the cloth that had been forcibly stuffed into his mouth. The sight of the human's mutilated body made Nhia and Khia clutch their bellies in laughter.

Nhia and Khia were both dapper young raiders. Even though they were full-fledged members of the White Knights, their baby faces, diminutive statures, and not-so-muscular builds suggested otherwise. But what they lacked in ruggedness, they made up for with their extremely “cute” facial features that would attract any woman who was into younger men. The sunny innocence of their personalities contrasted vastly with their grossly sadistic tendencies, which were apparent in the fact they'd purchased a human slave just to torture him for sport.

The muffled screams were the main reason why Soscha was feeling too nauseous to get in the mood. The slave was clearly trying to plead with Soscha to help him in some way, but she was in no position to do anything for him. All Soscha could do was avert her gaze and pretend to ignore the screams.

The slave wasn't the only reason why Soscha looked pale. The youngest member of the White Knights—who was also sitting at the table on the lawn—had openly expressed his disapproval at Sharphat cavorting with Soscha in broad daylight, as well as at the twin's barbaric game. This junior knight—who was called Muste—had red hair, was around 175 centimeters tall, and had a taut, muscular frame. If you ignored the vertical frown lines that had formed on his forehead, Muste looked quite the dashing young elf.

Sharphat continued talking without paying any heed to Muste's irritation at his antics or Hardy's nonresponse. “So anyway, an investigator told me Kyto was running around the place with a dark elf and they were straight-up murdering human adventurers, as well as some beastmen, dwarves, and centaurs to boot. And it was all because they believed that ‘leveling up’ rumor. But get this: they say it was some inferior kid who sent him packing.”

This “rumor” Sharphat referred to involved an elven knight who had purportedly broken his growth limit by grabbing his sword and slaying a human slave who had made a blunder. There were other

versions of the fable that had the victim as a member of one of the other races.

"I also heard about what happened to Kyto," said Muste. "As his peer, I'm very disappointed in him. Everyone thought he had the potential to be the next leader of the White Knights too."

"Dude, are you tryin' to humble brag right now?" Sharphat said. "You're all like, 'I worked *real* hard and ate up all my veggies, and now *I'm* the one in line to be the next leader, so suck on that, former rival!'" Sharphat put on a falsetto voice to mock Muste, which only deepened the creases on the younger elf's forehead.

"No, Sharphat, I honestly think it's a shame we have lost someone with Kyto's talent," Muste protested. "Please don't mischaracterize me like that, sir."

The human slave continued screaming through his cloth gag as Sharphat waved away Muste's objections. "I'm just kidding, dude. You really gotta loosen up, my guy. Take that broom outta your ass and do something about that goofy belief you have, or else you'll live to regret it. Consider this a piece of advice from your superior, bud."

"I truly appreciate your guidance, Sharphat," Muste said diplomatically. "But sir, I don't ever intend to change my personality, nor stray from my belief that humans *must* be wiped out."

Muste was so inflexible in his sense of righteousness, he was perfectly willing to defy and even admonish his superiors to their faces if he felt they were wrong. In this instance, it was out of altruism that Muste deemed it necessary for all humans to be wiped out—not because he despised them, but because he believed humans were so unsightly, feeble, and thoroughly incompetent, it was better to eradicate the entire race than to allow them to continue their miserable existence. Due to these principles, such as they were, Muste had voiced his deeply held disagreement over what Nhia and Khia were doing to the human slave, but the twins had ignored his scolding and carried on with their brutish lark, which had caused Muste to just sit there and sulk. Muste had repeatedly told Hardy and anyone who would listen that humans *must* be wiped out, but they were always quick to shoot down this idea.

Sharphat shrugged dismissively at Muste and continued from where he left off. "So anyway, back to that Kyto jerk," Sharphat said. "Thanks to that doofus, now everyone knows that it was an elf and a dark elf murdering all those people, and sketches of them have even been drawn up. They managed to escape deep into the dungeon by soaring off on the Grandius. But there's only one way out of that dungeon, and they can't just go sneaking out of there that easy, now that everyone knows what they look like."

Raucous laughter suddenly erupted across the lawn as Nhia and

Khia delighted in the painful plight of the slave. Sharphat's grin deliberately widened as he gamely tried to make himself heard over the noise.

"The top brass won't want any more egg on their face, so no doubt they're planning on sending us out on a little mission to sort it all out," concluded Sharphat. "Wish they'd cut us a break."

"Sharphat, do you hear yourself speak, sir?" Muste yelled at him. "Orders from our superiors are *absolute*! What's more, this is a former White Knight that has done all of those things! If anything, we should be taking the lead and heading off to take care of Kyto ourselves! If the dark elves behead Kyto and his accomplice before we get the chance to, it would disgrace the entire queendom!"

"Sure, it won't be awesome if the dark elves take that honor away from us," said Sharphat. "But that mission sounds like way too much of a hassle. I'd rather hang around here and get all kissy-kissy, lovey-dovey with my Soscha."

Sharphat leaned over and planted a kiss on Soscha's forehead, which made her queasy face redden. "Oh gosh, Sir Sharphat," Soscha said.

Muste's face wrinkled in further disgust at Sharphat's rather cavalier attitude. Meanwhile, in the background, the contest between the twins was loudly escalating, even drowning out the smothered, anguished cries of the slave.

"Nhia! I'm aiming for his other ear next!"

"In that case, I'll take out his eye, Khia!"

Sharphat had finally had enough. "For goddess's sakes! Just kill that thing already, you little asshats! And do it quietly!"

The twins puffed out their cheeks in indignation at Sharphat ruining their fun with his outburst. "We were the ones who bought this slave, so we can do what we want with it, right?" Nhia protested.

"Let us have our fun with *our* slave, just like you get to have fun with your so-called woman over there," Khia taunted.

"Yeah! *You're* the one acting out your fetish for butt-ugly inferiors!" Nhia agreed.

"Dude, don't go calling her ugly!" Sharphat retorted. "And it's not a 'fetish.' I just find her cute."

"Nhia, Khia, Sharphat, that is quite enough!" Muste interjected. "Why would you make these poor humans suffer instead of simply killing them mercifully? Where is your pride as fellow White Knights?"

A cacophonous din engulfed the lawn, fed by Sharphat's outbursts, Muste's remonstrations, the objections from the twins, and the muffled screams from the human slave. It only ended when Hardy issued a one-word command that barely rose above a whisper.

“Quiet.”

A deafening hush instantly replaced the discord—so much so, in fact, you could hear a pin drop. The tension was palpable enough that the other White Knights and the mutilated slave didn’t dare to utter another sound. Hardy calmly sipped the rest of his tea, then placed the cup back down on its saucer.

“The sound of human garbage ruins the taste of the tea,” Hardy said finally. “Nhia, Khia, amuse yourselves in your own quarters next time. And don’t toy with the creature. It’ll erode your killer instincts,” he admonished them. “Sharphat.”

“You got it, chief.” Still seated with Soscha in his lap, Sharphat lazily flicked a hand in the general direction of the human slave. In the same instant, a loud blast connected with the tree, obliterating the slave’s head from the neck up. A moment later, blood gushed from what was left of the slave’s neck like a geyser, filling the air with a copper-tinged stench. With Sharphat’s arms still wrapped around her, Soscha became even more nauseous.

“Nhia, Khia, get rid of that thing,” Hardy ordered. “Muste, you will clean the lawn.”

“Yes, commander,” the twins said in unison.

“As you wish, Commander Hardy,” Muste said after a brief pause.

Having been chastened by their leader, Nhia and Khia silently cut down the body of the slave and carried the headless corpse to the rear of the billet. Tasked with the most menial jobs as the youngest of the crew, Muste went to retrieve the tools he would need to clean up the blood and chunks of flesh that had redecorated large swathes of the lawn.

Soscha was trembling slightly against Sharphat’s torso. Order or no order, the elf whose lap she was sitting in hadn’t hesitated at all before blasting the slave’s head into tiny fragments. Sharphat finally noticed Soscha’s terrified state and quickly turned to comfort her. “Oh, I’m sorry, honey. Did that scare you? You know I can’t disobey a direct order from the boss, so you see, my hands were tied. You get that, don’t you, sweetie?”

“Y-Yes, I’m fine. H-Honest.” Soscha was, of course, far from being fine, but she felt she had little choice but to bury her true feelings.

Sharphat saw straight through Soscha’s unconvincing facade though. He let out a soft, almost guttural chuckle before giving her an excuse to leave his presence. “You know what’d be awesome, babe? If you got us some nice hot tea. Once you’re done, you can head on over to my room.”

“S-Sure! I’ll be right back!” Soscha scrambled out of Sharphat’s lap and hotfooted it toward the billet’s kitchen.

Once Soscha was a fair distance away, Hardy finally offered his

thoughts on the previous discussion. “Kyto was a third-rate fighter, had poor character coupled with an even worse attitude, and he hit his growth limit much too soon,” he summed up. “But even so, he was a full-fledged member of the White Knights. We will take care of him ourselves, because I wish to avoid the shame of having another race beat us to the punch. We must not allow the reputation of Her Majesty the Queen to be sullied any further.”

“Sure thing, chief,” said Sharphat. “Kyto *did* start out leveling up like crazy, so people naturally thought he was on course to be our next commander, but he ended up capping out too low. Can we maybe do a better job of screening our recruits in the future? The brand value of the White Knights will plummet otherwise.”

Another pregnant pause preceded Hardy’s response. “Don’t you see yourself in the running?”

“In the running? To be commander?” Sharphat fell about laughing as he waved away this humorous proposition. “No way, chief. That ain’t happening this century, I can tell you. I mean, sure, with my arrows, I can shoot down damn near everything, but I never go aiming for the moon. You catch my drift? I’m sure the vice-commander’s still gunning for your position, but not me. I’m gravy.”

Once he’d finished laughing himself silly, Sharphat took a sip of his tea, which was now lukewarm. “Yeah, no. Sure, I’ll admit I wanted to be the head honcho when I joined the White Knights, but I was younger and dumber back then, like we all are when we first join up. And besides, all of us Submasters go through that phase.”

Of all the nine races, it was the elves’ bloodlines that had intermingled the most with Masters. But being a descendant of a Master didn’t automatically guarantee an individual would be powerful, and the lineage to a Master grew weaker with each passing generation. But every so often, an elf was born who strongly exhibited traits directly inherited from a Master. These “Submasters” could easily surpass the level caps that limited regular elves, and it was widely thought that Submasters could raise their level indefinitely. However, those in the know believed Submasters also had their own growth limits, and that those caps were determined by an individual’s capabilities and by how closely the Submaster was related to a Master. The evidence could be seen just by looking at the White Knights themselves. Sharphat’s power level had capped out at around 2000, Mikhael had stopped leveling up at approximately 2500, while Nhia and Khia had reached 1800 and gone no higher. Muste—who was seen as one of the favorites to become the next commander of the White Knights—had hit Level 2000 and was still climbing. Of course, the White Knights’ levels weren’t public knowledge. Kyto had refused to accept the reality that he had reached his growth limit, which had

culminated in him pilfering the Grandius and absconding from the queendom.

The typical level caps of the other races were said to range from 100 for humans to 1000 for elves, dark elves, demonkin, and dragonutes. That didn't mean every member of a particular race could reach that limit, of course. If this were modern-day Japan, you'd be crazy to think the average joe off the street could run the 100-meter dash in under ten seconds if they just trained as hard as an Olympic athlete. In that scenario, training could never substitute for natural talent.

At the end of the day, the typical limits on power levels were simply rough estimates, not absolutes, and nowhere was this more demonstrable than in the Submasters that made up the White Knights. They weren't just considered exceptions to the rule; the White Knights could legitimately be called total abnormalities without raising any eyebrows. One could only imagine how insanely powerful a Master must be.

Making it into the White Knights was the dream of every young elven male in the queendom, but being a Submaster was the primary prerequisite for entering the order, so the stipulations for recruitment were kept under wraps for obvious reasons. As a matter of fact, only a select group of people even knew about Masters and Submasters. To put it another way, the White Knights were probably less a *full* order of knights, as one might usually interpret the term, and more a special unit made up of a chosen few.

Sharphat was descended from a Master and had joined the White Knights as a Submaster. As he had told Hardy, he had initially aspired to someday be promoted all the way up to head of the order. "But I gave up on that idea after I saw the all-powerful Hardy the Silent," Sharphat said with a little giggle. "I'd have to be outta my mind to want to take over from a beast like you."

The elves who joined the White Knights were often talked up as "prodigies" who might one day become the commander, but after spending any amount of time around Hardy, several of them concluded they weren't advancing any further, so they might as well just enjoy their current circumstances. Kyto was a notable exception to this, as was Mikhael, who was biding his time, waiting for the right opportunity to replace Hardy as the leader. By contrast, Sharphat had abruptly stopped caring about rank and instead turned his focus to living his best life.

Soscha arrived with fresh tea just as the two elves were wrapping up this particular thread of conversation. She placed the teapot on the table before scurrying off to Sharphat's room in the billet. Sharphat waved goodbye to Soscha as she disappeared, while Hardy waited

silently until she was out of earshot.

“I won’t use the words Nhia and Khia did, but I do have a problem with you taking an inferior as your lover,” the commander said. “You’ll only taint the bloodline.”

Hardy couldn’t fathom why a Submaster would risk diluting the power they had inherited from a Master. It had been thousands of years since the last Master had appeared, meaning there were only a handful of Submasters in his generation. To be more precise, there were fewer than twenty known Submasters in the whole of the Elven Queendom, and that included the ones in the White Knights. Seeing Sharphat carrying on this love affair with a human given those circumstances had prompted Hardy to rebuke his associate.

Sharphat responded to his concerns with a lighthearted grin. “Oh, you don’t say. Well, sure, inferior girls are hideous for the most part, but some of them are cute enough if you can overlook their obvious deficiencies. Besides, it’s too funny watching ’em get all excited about an elf flirting with them. It’s even more hilarious when they’re bustin’ their humps to stop you from leaving them. But you can relax, chief. I promise you none of these chicks will get knocked up. Not by me. I’m never that serious about ’em anyway. Hell, I’m bored with this girl I’ve got right now, so I think it’s probably about time I got rid of her for good. You know what else is hysterical? Taking ’em out to the outskirts of town, letting ’em loose, and hunting ’em for sport. I swear, I bust a gut every time they start running for their lives, a look of betrayal on their faces and begging for you to spare them. You really should come with, chief. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“I’ll pass,” Hardy said, looking pointedly uninterested. “A kill order for Kyto will soon be handed down to us. Make sure she’s gone by then.”

“Got it, chief,” Sharphat replied, knowing when to give up on an invite.

However, in the end, the queendom didn’t get around to issuing a search and destroy order for Kyto because another emergency took priority. Later that same night, an earthquake struck the domain and caused a number of buildings to collapse. A few days later, a giant mystery tower was spotted deep in a forest not far from the capital.

Chapter 4: The Great Mystery Tower

The capital of the Elven Queendom was located west of the central region of the nation. The country bordered the Dwarf Kingdom to the west, but the queendom wasn't overly worried about the dwarves invading them, because the two nations were separated by mountains and a primeval forest. In the depths of this forest, a giant, mysterious tower had appeared, its sudden arrival causing an earthquake late one night. On a clear day, the top of the mystery tower could be seen with the naked eye from the tallest steeple in the Elven Queendom's capital. If the tower had been in a better location, it would've made for a prime tourist spot.

There was understandably quite a bit of fallout from the sudden appearance of such a large building. First of all, monsters that usually resided deep in the woods were forced to move closer to the forest's edge, and many of these monsters ended up wandering onto the main road, disrupting the primary transport route for goods. This created huge issues because there was a port town directly south of the capital. Elves in that town made salt on the coastline and conducted trade with the Dragonute Empire, the Dwarf Kingdom, Demonkin Nation, the Beastfolk Federation, the Dark Elf Islands, the Centaur Steppes, and the Onifolk Archipelago. But the monsters were causing all sorts of problems for the traffic on the main highway that connected this port town to the capital, which in turn caused the price of goods to spike dramatically in the capital, presenting a crisis of critical proportions for the Elven Queendom.

The problems went beyond road traffic being disrupted though, and there was no statesman alive who would let this tower—which had been dubbed the “Great Mystery Tower”—go unexamined. However, all the regular Elven Queendom knights were busy securing the road between the port town and the capital, and because the White Knights were the most elite fighting force in the queendom, there was no chance of them being mobilized for some low-level reconnaissance mission. Instead, the queendom attempted to make do with sending adventurers to investigate the tower, but so far, they'd all been unsuccessful in that objective.

The first obstacle was the monsters; they refused to return to the deepest part of the forest. It had initially been thought that the creatures had emptied out of the woods because they'd simply been

frightened by the earthquake and the arrival of the mystery tower, and that they'd soon return to their natural habitat. But even several days later, the monsters were still milling around on the roadside.

On top of that, half of the adventurers who'd been deployed to scout the mystery tower had ended up slaughtered. Those who did make it back alive reported that they'd been attacked by large, four-legged monsters with live snakes for tails. Putting two and two together, it appeared these new monsters were responsible for keeping the old monsters from returning to the deepest parts of the forest. Also, there was no way of ruling out that there might be other new types of monsters prowling around the tower, and some of those might even be powerful enough to cause significant damage to the queendom. Yet no adventurer had managed to get close enough to the tower to gain any useful intelligence.

"Is this a joke?"

At the count's estate, Sasha was reading the latest info on the mystery tower that she had obtained using her connections to the royal family. "Does this mean I have no choice but to go to *that* place?"

After revealing that he wasn't quite as dead as Sasha had thought, Light had left a message for her, which had said to meet him at the "great tower." Since then, the tower in question had appeared out of thin air to the west of the capital, but no adventurer was able to get near it due to the vicious quadrupeds that seemed to be surrounding the edifice. This left Sasha with the unavoidable prospect of having to make the dangerous journey to the tower herself.

"The monsters that used to live deep in that forest are supposedly between Levels 150 and 200," Sasha muttered to herself. "But nearly all of those monsters are too scared to go back where they came from because of this 'snake-tailed beast.' Just how powerful is this new monster?!"

Since Sasha was Level 500, she was able to defeat one or two of the normal forest monsters easily enough, but with them all camping out on the edge of the forest in large groups, Sasha could quickly get overwhelmed if she wasn't careful. And that was before she even considered taking on these much more dangerous new monsters that prowled deep in the forest and prevented the native creatures from returning. Questing to the tower without any decent recon info would be a suicide mission.

"Maybe I should tell the queendom the truth about this tower," Sasha mused. "The queendom and the other nations have declared Light dead, so if I tell the queendom he's still alive, they'll send Sir Mikhael and the other White Knights to eliminate that wretched inferior for good. That way, the other nations will owe the queendom

a mighty big favor...”

But in that scenario, Sasha would bring about her own downfall. She'd be banished from the count's household, saddled with debt, forced to return to the hardscrabble life of an adventurer, and worst of all, she'd once again find herself ridiculed by her father's family. Just the thought of it caused Sasha to gag and cover her mouth.

“No...” she uttered quietly, before raising her voice and saying, “No, no, no, no! I'd rather *die* than watch them laugh at my downfall!”

Elves were a prideful race, and Sasha's upbringing made her even more prideful than most. In this moment, her injured ego was getting in the way of her quality of life; she'd developed huge bags under her eyes due to a lack of sleep, she had skin problems, and her hair had lost its luster. Sasha's mind turned to coming up with rationalizations for not telling her nation the truth.

“The queendom might not even believe me if I tell them Light's still alive. The only proof I have is that piece of paper and a fleeting glimpse of a kid who looked a bit like him. Plus, there's no way of knowing if he's even inside that mystery tower. It would be irresponsible of me to go to Sir Mikhael and the queendom with such half-baked information! Wait, of *course*! Before I do anything rash, I should make sure I have all the information at my fingertips!”

Sasha's sleep-deprived melancholy was steadily crescendoing into a newfound excitement now that she'd hit upon a potential way out of her predicament. With her half-crazed eyes leering into the middle distance, Sasha started piecing together a plan for how she might approach the mystery tower.

“I'll have to hire top adventurers to serve as my bodyguards-slash-decoys, even if it means spending all of the reward money I have left,” Sasha plotted. “Then I'll have to gather as much information about that tower as I can...”

Even if the Concord of the Tribes was now ancient history, Sasha had once been a member of a world-famous party of first-rate adventurers. She had the money, the connections, and the knowledge to prepare her for the biggest quest of her life.



Trembling in her rags, a little human girl sniffled and sobbed as she traipsed barefoot through the wild forest near the capital. Behind her, a trio of D-ranked elf adventurers were tailing the frightened child.

“Quit stalling and keep moving, you worthless inferior!” the leader of the elves shouted over to her.

“I gotta hand it to you, boss,” said one of the other elves, who was holding a sword and a shield. “I was honestly grossed out when you

first bought this kid, thinking you were into underage inferiors or something, but it never crossed my mind that you were planning to use her as monster bait on this quest.”

“I sure was,” the first elf said, tapping his temple with his finger. “Us leaders have to use the old noodle every once in a while, you know?”

Long story short, this party of elves had bought a young girl from a slave trader to act as a forward scout to check to see if there were any monsters up ahead. If a monster were to attack and eat the girl, it would buy the elves precious time to escape. In other words, she wasn’t all that different from a canary in a coal mine.

“The only problem with my perfect plan is this lousy brat’s too scared to go any faster. C’mon, git! You don’t want me to smack you again, do you?!”

The girl shrieked. “S-Sorry! I’m sorry! Please don’t hit me!”

“Then quit your crying and get a move on!”

The girl was unable to stop the tears from streaming down her face, but she did pick up the pace like the elf leader had told her to, largely because she had no other choice. She couldn’t outrun the elves, and besides, two of the party carried bows. Apparently, this party’s chosen fighting style was to have the shield bearer soak up a monster’s attacks while the other two killed it with arrows. If the girl attempted to flee, the elves would just shoot her in the leg and she’d suffer an unspeakable fate.

The slave girl continued her forced march through the forest, constantly beating back the rising dread that a monster might suddenly lunge out of the trees and attack her. The elven adventurers followed on behind, the trio patting themselves on the back for their cleverness.

“Today’s just a test run, but if this works, we can buy a whole bunch of inferior kids to use as bait next time.”

“And these female runts don’t even cost all that much, so they’re totally disposable.”

“Inferiors sort of look like us, but when it comes down to it, they’re really nothing more than talking livestock—”

The third elf—who was an archer just like the leader—suddenly found himself without a head mid-sentence, the blood spurting from his open neckhole spattering over the handsome faces of the other two. A monster had attacked the party from the rear without rustling any leaves or breaking a single twig. It was as if the creature had somehow teleported behind them.

The two surviving elves stood rooted to the spot in total shock at the sudden loss of their friend, as well as at the sight of the monster that was looming over them. This behemoth looked to be about ten

meters in length and stood on all fours, yet its tail—which was thicker than the torso of the little girl—moved like a live snake. The snake-tail slithered about in midair toward the group, its bloodred tongue flicking in and out of its mouth. The elves didn't know they were looking at a Snake Hellhound, a Level 1000 creature.

"Wh-What the hell?!" the leader screamed. "You were *supposed* to attack the inferior girl—gaaah!"

"Boss?!" the other elf cried out.

The leader of the party had been trying to back away from the monster while airing his grievances about their bait plan not working, but the snake-tail was too quick for him, and it latched onto the shoulder of the elf. Its teeth bit their way through armor, skin, flesh, and bone, crushing the elf's shoulder.

"Crap, crap, crap! Screw this!" yelled the other elf—the one with the shield—before running headlong at the Snake Hellhound and swinging his sword toward it in desperation. The monster's rock-hard skin easily deflected the blade, however, causing the elf to lose his balance. This momentary stagger was all the opportunity the Snake Hellhound needed to launch into a counterattack against its aggressor. The elf's horrified screams rang out around the forest until the monster muted them by ripping him in half at the waist and gobbling down the top half. It turned out the creature wasn't a wasteful eater, as it went back to noisily chew down the elf's bottom half too.

"H-Help me! Somebody help!"

Even though his shoulder had been crushed to a pulp, the leader of the party was still alive. He screamed for help as tears streamed from his eyes, snot dribbled from his nose, and saliva oozed from his mouth. Although the Snake Hellhound pretty much ignored him, its tail didn't, and it proceeded to swallow down the elf party leader, feet first. The elf kept on screaming for help until the tail finally gulped him down whole.

In a blink of an eye, the girl had found herself all alone with this Snake Hellhound, which was now eyeing her. The girl was unable to scream; all she could do was silently slump into a sitting position on the forest floor. This hellbeast had just crushed those elves like bugs—the same elves the girl had been too powerless to defy. Even though she was an uneducated slave girl, she knew this creature was something virtually unreal, like a monster out of a scary bedtime story. It *had* to be, because what other explanation was there for those powerful elves getting slaughtered so easily?

The Snake Hellhound stared at the girl for a little while longer, before abruptly burping as if it had eaten its fill, focusing its gaze away from her, and loping silently off into the forest again. It wasn't long before the giant creature was swallowed up by the sea of

branches and leaves.

“Uh, does this mean I’m saved?” Still finding it hard to believe she’d actually survived that encounter, the little girl sat stock-still in an awkward “W” position, with her legs either side of her rump. But a moment later, a man’s creepy-sounding laughter totally obliterated her fleetingly brief sense of relief.

“Looks like we found ourselves a real diamond in the rough here, boys!”

The next thing the girl knew, she was surrounded by five human adventurers, who looked like hoodlums with their hair styled into mohawks. Even though they were in a dark forest, every single one of them was wearing glasses that were completely black—sunglasses, in other words. Chuckling disturbingly, they all drew closer to the girl.

The man with the red mohawk who had spoken before continued where he’d left off. “Never thought we’d find a slave free of her dead masters in these here woods. Talk about a lucky break!”

The despairing girl whimpered softly. First, she’d been bought by elves to be used as a decoy for monsters, and then as soon as she was free of them, a band of predatory human thugs looked like they were about to gang up on her. Even though the elves had beaten her and called her an “ugly inferior,” they’d never gone as far as sexually assaulting her. But these full-grown human men looked and acted utterly depraved. She could make a break for it, but she risked running into that monster again, and it would likely spell the end for her this time.

I might get out of here alive if I let these guys hurt me. After all, I really don’t want to get eaten alive by that thing. The girl could still vividly recall the carnage the Snake Hellhound had wrought on the party of elves, along with their haunting screams. Whatever these Mohawks were planning to do to her would be a thousand times better than dying a death as horrible as those elves had met. In her heart, the little girl resigned herself to the lesser of two evils as the grinning creeps drew closer.

“You ain’t gonna be worth much on the market with all those bruises on you, kid,” said the chuckling red-haired Mohawk. “First, we gotta patch you up. Take this potion.”



To the girl's surprise, the Mohawk gave her a healing potion. And it wasn't one of the low-grade kinds, which were iffy at best. It was the type of standard-strength potion used by veteran adventurers who knew it'd heal their wounds. In fact, this particular bottle of potion was more expensive than the price the elves had paid for the little girl. The other Mohawks jumped in with their own offers of help.

"I'll make some simple cloth shoes to cover your feet!" one said.

"I'll grab one of these tree branches and make a walking stick!" declared another.

"If you want a bath, you gotta wait till you're out of the woods, kiddo!"

A small bird landed on the raised hand of the red-haired Mohawk, who leaned in closer to it so he could have what appeared to be a hushed conversation with the animal. "Yes, yes. Okay, yeah. Yup, we secured her. Yeah, we'll do the usual routine."

While all this was going on, the girl clutched the healing potion as she stared at the scene in front of her in a daze, completely forgetting about the fact she'd been deathly scared only moments before. *Maybe I'm already dead and I'm having visions?* she thought. The slave girl eventually gulped the potion down, which healed her injuries right up, and the Mohawks escorted her out of the forest like the gentlemen they were.

Chapter 5: The Plan

The Great Mystery Tower (as it had been dubbed in the queendom) consisted of five circular tiers, the circumference of each segment smaller than the one below in a pattern that repeated all the way up the tower. It wasn't yet known what the tower was made of, but the exterior had the look of smooth, unblemished white marble. Close up, the tower resembled a giant wedding cake more than anything.

Sitting on the edge of the first tier was Aoyuki, the Genius Monster Tamer, her slight legs dangling over the side.

"Meeow." With her cat-eared hood framing her baby face and bright blue hair like always, Aoyuki had established a mental link with the monsters she had tamed and was coordinating them all from her present vantage point. She could sense everything the creatures were perceiving through all five of their senses, and using her psychic link to them, she was able to order the monsters to eliminate any hostile adventurers who dared to approach the tower.

Ellie suddenly descended from the sky, her skirt billowing softly around her, and took a seat next to Aoyuki, who had her eyes closed. Ellie casually fixed her hair before addressing her younger-looking cohort. "So how are things on your end?"

"Mrroww," came the reply.

Ellie paused briefly. "I'll take that to mean it's all going smoothly. I'm honestly amazed Blessed Lord Light is able to hold any sort of conversation with you."

She softly cleared her throat before continuing. "Not that I doubt your abilities, Aoyuki, but you *are* controlling many types of monsters in this part of the surface world. Problems with decision-making, fatigue, and other subtle issues might arise that never came up when you were out patrolling the forest encircling the Abyss. This is an excellent opportunity for you to identify and resolve these problems, so make sure you have fun while you're doing all of this."

Ellie remembered something else. "Oh, and one other thing: Blessed Lord Light has ordered us to rescue any humans who are being subjected to abuse in this forest, though you are by all means free to slaughter their abusers, no matter their race. I'll leave you to judge each individual situation as it arises, Aoyuki."

"Mreew," Aoyuki responded, her eyes still closed.

Ellie gazed at Aoyuki as she considered Light's motives. *I once again applaud Blessed Lord Light for testing our emotional aptitude for judging right from wrong. Aoyuki seems to understand what's required of her, but what about the others? I'm especially worried about those adventurers with the weird mohawks, who were assigned to patrol the forest and safeguard any humans they stumble across. Blessed Lord Light summoned those men with his Gift, so I shouldn't be too worried about them knowingly betraying us, but if they ever make a mistake when it comes to deciding right from wrong, it could very well end up being fatal to our plans. Should I drill it into their heads what exactly they must do before any problems crop up? But then, wouldn't that go against what Blessed Lord Light wants? If so, my Blessed Lord would be furious with me. So I suppose it is better to just sit back and watch?*

While Ellie's mind was busy whirring away at full tilt, Aoyuki sharply rebuked the witch. "Do not concern yourself with those matters. Master has thought of everything. You disrespect our one true Lord by trying to guess at his thoughts."

For Ellie, who had dedicated herself to figuring out and fully understanding Light's intentions so that she could maximize the results of this revenge plot, Aoyuki's words felt like cold water being splashed in her face. "Is that what you think?" the Forbidden Witch fired back, pouting. "Don't you believe that the best way to serve our Lord as his devoted follower—or as his woman, even—is by truly *understanding* how his heavenly mind works, supporting him, and eventually bearing his child?"

"No. What Master desires of us is all that matters. We live for him and fight for him. We comfort him and serve his every need. We love him and cherish him by never leaving his side. We become his weapon and his shield. We kill and are killed. We walk through fire for him and we burn to ash for him. Our only thought should be on how to be useful to Master. All other thoughts are unworthy and unclean."

This unusually long lecture from Aoyuki could be summed up as: "Anything Light wants me to do, I'll do it." Due to how Aoyuki looked physically, Light wanted her to comfort him and give him succor as a little sister of sorts, so Aoyuki willingly acted as if she were his younger sister and his pet, all rolled into one.

But hearing Aoyuki's words caused Ellie's brow to wrinkle in disgust. "So *that's* why you're fine with behaving like you're his pet? I don't understand you at all."

"No, we don't understand each other," Aoyuki confirmed. "I get the urge to kill you every time I see you fighting with Mei in front of Master. If you cause trouble for him, I will end you."

"My word, what an unfunny jokester you are," Ellie chortled. "Are you really suggesting you think you can beat me?"

“We won’t know until we put it to the test,” Aoyuki replied coolly, her eyes hidden under the rim of her hood. “It would also be a good opportunity to find out what happens when one of us dies.”

The atmosphere between the two was so tense, sparks were practically crackling in the air around them. Birds sitting on branches a good distance away suddenly took flight and flapped away.

If Light’s four lieutenants were to be ranked in order of strength, Nazuna would be in top spot, Ellie second, Aoyuki third, and Mei would be down in last. Nazuna took the crown primarily due to her berserker strength; Mei lagged behind the others because, even though she demonstrated proficiency in pretty much everything, she was found wanting when it came to decisive, fight-ending abilities; Ellie specialized in area-of-effect attacks; and Aoyuki would also be categorized as an area-of-effect fighter due to her being a monster tamer, but in terms of destructive and exterminating power, she was a step below Ellie. At the same time, Ellie and Aoyuki were both Level 9999 warriors, and it was only one spot on an ill-defined ranking list that separated the two, which meant it was unlikely Ellie would be able to defeat Aoyuki easily if they were to battle. The pair continued to glare at each other silently for what seemed like several seconds, maybe even as long as a minute.

“Mew.”

Aoyuki’s gaze suddenly turned from Ellie to a location far off in the forest. A monster sharing a mental link with its tamer had requested orders. Ellie breathed a quiet sigh of relief and pretended to fix her hair, though in reality, she was wiping sweat from her brow.

“I shouldn’t keep bothering you while you’re working,” Ellie said finally. “Though I’ll admit it was worth it to hear what you *really* think. I really do hope we get the opportunity to make these little heart-to-hearts a regular thing.”

“Meeow.” Aoyuki had her eyes closed again, and there was no way of telling from her catlike response if this suggestion interested her or not. Knowing there wasn’t much point trying to press her for a real answer, Ellie took to the skies once more and headed for one of the tower’s upper floors.



A large group of adventurers, merchants, and soldiers had taken up temporary residence in a spot on the edge of the wild forest close to the Elven Queendom. With spaces for tents, cooking fires, and latrines, the spot looked more like a decent-sized makeshift colony than a campsite. Of all the quests issued by the guild in the Elven Queendom’s capital, this mission to investigate the Great Mystery Tower had drawn in the most adventurers. Many a party had made

forays into the forest to the west, but it had become a bit of a hassle returning to the capital after each round of questing, so the adventurers had started setting up camp nearer to the woods for the sake of convenience. Before long, a number of other parties had set up camps of their own in roughly the same area until they all seemed to merge into a veritable city of tents. This vast “camptown” drew in soldiers that had been assigned to secure the area, and a mobile brothel had even set up shop there.

“Yo, pops!” the chuckling red-mohawked leader called out. “Got some more loot you can take off our hands!”

“Right you are,” the human merchant replied. “Thanks again for your business.”

The Mohawks handed the human slave girl they’d escorted out of the forest over to the merchant. According to the laws governing the nine nations, a slave that had lost their master became the legal property of the first person to take custody of them. The new owner then had the choice of either keeping the slave around for labor or setting them free. That said, those who found themselves emancipated from a life of slavery—often the only life they’d ever known—usually didn’t have the wherewithal to live on their own. The only fates that awaited the newly freed were to return to a life of servitude, to starve to death, or to take up a life of crime and ultimately get themselves arrested. How the criminal ex-slaves were then treated depended on the laws of whichever nation they were in.

People who found and took custody of masterless slaves usually sold them to slave traders. This was because abandoned slaves were typically found by groups of people, so splitting the money minimized any squabbling, and as this type of transaction was also legal—the nine nations all agreed that it was one of the official rights of slave ownership—no one was in a position to complain about these arrangements.

So the Mohawks transferred ownership of the slave girl they’d brought to the camptown over to the stout merchant they’d engaged, and were compensated for their troubles. This particular merchant had a few other human girls of a similar age, who were all presently busy unloading goods from a wagon and lining them up on shelves, as well as helping out with sales transactions. If anything, they were more like apprentices than slaves, and all the girls seemed healthy and well looked after. The girl that had been found by the Mohawks would likely be doing the same kind of work in a matter of days.

After the money had been handed over, the merchant bowed his head to the Mohawks. “I do hope we can do business again, kind sirs.”

“Sure! You betcha!” the Mohawks all chuckled crudely before heading over to where the cooking was taking place. In addition to

handing over the girl to him, they'd also bought ingredients for a stew from the merchant, which they proceeded to cook over one of the fires. While the stew was simmering, the Mohawks grumbled to each other in low voices so they wouldn't be overheard.

"Thankfully, we were able to get another of those girls to one of ours," one muttered.

"Sure, but the way they dump on us humans stinks so bad, it's not even funny," another pointed out.

"Damn straight. Who the hell uses a little girl as monster bait anyway? My blood runs cold just knowin' there are people who think that's okay."

The merchant and the Mohawks were humans that had been summoned by Light's Gift, the Unlimited Gacha. The merchant was Level 15, while the Mohawks' power levels ranged from 20 to 25. Their mission was to journey around the surface world and gather whatever intelligence they could. Using his trade as a front, the merchant had gathered plenty of information, while the Mohawks had picked up a few interesting bits of intel while disguised as low-ranked questers. Others like them had been sent all over the world to perform the same task, and these intelligence-gatherers could be found in the Human Kingdom, the Beastfolk Federation, the Dragonute Empire, the Dwarf Kingdom, and all the rest. These operatives had started their activities six months before Light himself had ascended to the surface world for the first time after conquering the Abyss. In that time, the Mohawks had attained the status of E-rank adventurers, the speed of their promotion pretty rapid for humans.

At this moment in time, those same Mohawks were all sitting around the stewpot, adding vegetables to it, skimming off the broth scum, and waiting for the right moment to chuck in the meat.

"This antihuman bigotry has gone too far, man. And it's all 'cause they say humans are the weakest of the nine races," one piped up.

"Amen to that, brother," came the reply. "No matter what nation, city, or village we set foot in, we're always treated like ever-loving garbage. If you don't like us *that* much, just ignore us, why don'tcha?"

"Yeah, man. They say the opposite of love is apathy or whatever."

Bigots had discriminated against and picked fights with the Mohawks more times than they could count by this point, though thanks to their overall ruggedness and the fact they generally traveled in groups of fives, the Mohawks had yet to find themselves in any *real* life-or-death situations. That said, even if they had been, all of Light's operatives who were active on the surface world possessed SSR Teleportation cards that could warp them back to the Abyss in case of emergencies. But even though the Mohawks didn't have to worry all that much about their own safety, witnessing the horrible treatment of

fellow human beings everywhere they went was a really disheartening part of their mission.

“What we saw back there in the forest seems to back up that rumor we heard.”

“You mean the one about the Human Kingdom selling its own citizens to other nations?”

“Can’t rule it out, man.”

Once the vegetables had cooked through a bit, the Mohawks added the meat, ladled off the soup scum, and tipped in some salt to improve the taste. Every movement the Mohawks made was like that of a professional chef, but their general mood was markedly negative.

Most of the Human Kingdom’s citizens were peasant farmers and the nation’s main export was farm goods, but these products were sold for a pittance, so it was only natural that the country would look to other resources to sell to foreign nations to make up the shortfall. One alternative resource would be their own people. Humans, in other words. If the Human Kingdom was conducting this trafficking trade of its own volition, the situation could be salvaged by simply dealing with corrupt leaders, but there was evidence that the other eight nations were deliberately *compelling* the kingdom to export human slaves. And it’d be one thing if those slaves were only ever put to work in coal mines or used for menial jobs, but there was another worst-case scenario that made the Mohawks shiver reflexively just thinking about it.

“Sure glad Lord Light’s our master,” one reflected.

“With you on that, brother,” another said.

“Sure, but don’t you ever get the feeling that humans have it this bad by design or something?” one of the other Mohawks posited.

“Ya think? I just reckon all the other races ’cept humans lack morals.”

“Honestly, I personally think Lord Light should get off his duff and destroy all them other races, then start over with a clean slate as this world’s ruler.”

“I hear that.”

“Damn straight.”

“No kiddin’.”

“I hear ya, but keep that under your hat, buddy. You never know who might be listening in.”

“Sorry, big boss,” said the Mohawk who had spoken his mind.

“My tongue got away from me there.”

The Mohawks were a good distance from the other adventurers in the camptown, but they made a point of staying sharp all the same. They didn’t need to be so worried though, as all the other adventurers around them seemed totally engrossed in their own conversations,

either talking about random topics or strategizing for their quests. They didn't seem to have the extra headspace required to eavesdrop on the Mohawks at the same time.

Once they'd scoped out their surroundings, the Mohawks allowed themselves to breathe a collective sigh of relief. At that exact moment, almost as if it was intentional, a tiny blue bird landed on the red-haired leader's shoulder. To anyone watching, the bird would just look like the leader's familiar, but in reality, it was a monster that was receiving its instructions from Aoyuki via a mental link. The bird also checked its surroundings before chirping something into the Mohawk leader's ear.

"Yeah. Yup, right. Affirmative," the leader said, seemingly in conversation with the bird. "So we head for the southwest coast tomorrow. Right. So first, the Snake Hellhound strikes 'em hard, then we come in and do our thing. Yeah, let's stick to the pattern."

Of course, the leader wasn't really speaking to the bird; it was actually Aoyuki he was addressing. The monster tamer was using the bird to survey the area and as a bridge through which she could relay instructions to the Mohawk leader using an SR Telepathy card. The other Mohawks continued preparing the stew while they waited for their boss to finish up his discussion. Once Aoyuki was done handing down her orders, the bird flew off to parts unknown.

"All right, boys. We're heading southwest at sunup!" the leader announced. "Make sure you get some good shut-eye and don't forget to check your gear!"

"Got it, boss!" the rest of the gang replied cheerfully in unison.

When the campfire stew was finally cooked through and ready to eat, the Mohawks dug in. They usually used dried meat and dried vegetables in their hotpots and ate it with hardtack bread they'd soaked in the stew, because those types of foodstuffs kept for days, but this time around, they were enjoying a stew of fresh vegetables and fresh meat along with some good bread, all of which they'd bought from the merchant. Even though salt was the only seasoning, like always, the food was tastier and much more tender than what they were used to. Best of all, unlike the hardtack bread you could chip your tooth on if you weren't careful, the bread they had this time had been baked fresh this morning, so there was no need to dip it in the broth first to soften it up. For those reasons alone, this meal was a feast. But the Mohawks all still thought the same thing as they wolfed down the stew: *I really wish I was eating the heavenly grub they have in the Abyss.*

The dungeon's gourmet chef was known to whip up haute cuisine using ingredients produced by Unlimited Gacha cards, and due to how high quality all these ingredients were—as well as the variety of spices

used and the mastery of the chef—what was available on the surface world paled in comparison to the meals served in the Abyss. Yet the Mohawks put up with these comparatively underwhelming meals while up on the surface because that was just how much they loved and respected Light, and they'd all sworn a pledge of absolute allegiance to their lord. As such, they dutifully gulped down their salty broth and got ready to tackle their next mission.



My party—the Black Fools—was presently engaged in farming ice gems from yetis for one last time on the fifth floor of the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon. I was once again dressed as my surface-world alias “Dark,” and I was in the middle of experimenting with Unlimited Gacha cards I didn’t normally use, seeing how they fared when up against the hairy, three-meter-tall monsters.

I did my best to yell out the card names above the yetis’ deafening roars. “SSR Fire Squall! SSR Dead Man’s Silence! SSR Child’s Play—release!”

Dead Man’s Silence was an attack that had a low instant kill rate. Yetis typically attacked in groups of about a dozen or so, and after I’d used the card, I counted one dead yeti in this particular herd. The Fire Squall was a combination fire and wind attack. The yetis hit by this spell were sliced to pieces, then turned into balls of fire, evaporating the snow around them. Next, I unleashed the Child’s Play attack on the yetis who’d survived both of the previous cards. This spell caused the targets to hear the crazed laughter of a child, which made them go mad and caused them to lose the ability to fight or even flee.

I gazed at the confused yetis that remained, not fully satisfied with the results of my experimentation. “Sorry but these magical attacks are too meh. They’re not very practical either.”

“They’re supposed to be the kind of tactical magic spells everyone on the surface world covets, but they’re simply not up to *your* standards, Lord Dark!”

A smiling Nemumu had heard me mumbling under my breath and seen her opportunity to jump in with her usual flattery. The tanned beauty was one of my party members for the duration of my Operation Adventurer mission up here on the surface world. Even though she was questing in a skimpy outfit in the middle of a blizzard, the cold didn’t seem to bother her at all. It just went to show that the Level 5000 Assassin’s Blade could operate in basically any environment without too much trouble.

The other member of my party—the Auric Knight Gold—couldn’t resist twisting Nemumu’s fawning words and using them against her. “Nemumu, m’girl, are you *really* sure you want to be suggesting that

milord's magic might not be up to snuff?"

"No! He's got it all wrong, Lord Ligh—I mean, Lord Dark!" Nemumu said, her lovestruck face transforming into a picture of sheer agitation. "I wasn't belittling your magic *at all*! I was simply saying those attacks didn't live up to your greatness!"

I chuckled sheepishly before attempting to calm her down. "It's okay. I don't think badly of you. As a matter of fact, I'm not even sure these magic attacks are as powerful as their rarity suggests. I'm just glad I was able to test them out here where nobody could see us." Nemumu had been right when she'd said the attacks didn't live up to my standards. I could've killed the yetis faster with my staff.

"Ah, Lord Dark!" Nemumu yelled suddenly.

"Yeah, I can sense it too," I said. "There's a huge monster coming this way."

Nemumu's flustered expression immediately turned deadly serious as she glared into the wind that was blowing the snow into our faces. Nemumu's heightened ability to detect enemies had been the main reason for bringing her with me to the surface world. She'd been the first to sense this mystery monster, a few seconds before even I did.

"Hm, if my eyes aren't betraying me, I'd say that's a Frost Basilisk, what?" Gold guessed, holding his hand above his visor and peering into the distance in an attempt to identify the target. "A rare sight in these frozen wastelands. Didn't bank on one of those blighters coming down from the blinkin' mountains."

Gold was soon proven right as the Frost Basilisk emerged through the curtain of squalling snowflakes. The vaguely reptilian monster was a good ten meters in length, walked on six legs, had spikes growing out of its back, and was covered in alabaster scales that made it blend in with the blizzard around it. Due to the Frost Basilisk residing on the fifth floor, few adventurers had ever seen it, and because its wintry camouflage allowed the monster to approach its victims without being sighted, the very small number of adventurers who actually did get a glimpse of it rarely lived to tell the tale. In fact, the guild had warned questers to just drop everything and run if we ever did come across a Frost Basilisk. Perhaps understandably, there was no record of anyone actually killing one of these creatures.

"Do you think it was a coincidence it wandered down here, or was it drawn by the yetis?" I mused.

"Either way works for us, eh?" said Gold. "What bally good luck that we've encountered such a rare specimen—and on our last day here, no less! Its gem would make a stonking centerpiece for our final haul."

Any normal party would run for their lives, but to us, the Frost Basilisk was just an unusual spawn. Perhaps noticing we were

watching it, the Frost Basilisk bellowed an earsplitting shriek that overlapped the snow-white breath gushing from its mouth. An ordinary basilisk's breath had the power to turn its target to stone, but this creature's breath could freeze a target in its tracks. Once it had turned its victim into a block of ice, the Frost Basilisk would then munch down its prey.

The Frost Basilisk could also render a target motionless if its victim looked into its eyes. The monster's basic attack pattern was to immobilize the target with its gaze, then turn the target to ice with its breath and eat it. This particular Frost Basilisk chose that moment to use its icy breath to make ice statues of all the crazed yetis left on the frozen tundra. However, neither the monster's evil eye nor its frost breath worked on us, due to our much higher stats. Yet, at least compared to the yetis, the Frost Basilisk was a totally overpowered beast.

"Since we now have a monster that's stronger than those yetis, I might as well test out something that's a little more powerful than an SSR attack," I said as I pulled a card out of my front pocket. "SSSR Plasma Sun—release!"

The released card produced a ball of light that shone as bright as the sun above the Frost Basilisk. Not only did the heat from the sphere melt the monster, it also evaporated the frozen yetis, plus all the wintry clouds that had been causing the blizzard. The heat from the Plasma Sun melted right through the Frost Basilisk's scales, flesh, and bones, and even dissolved the gem inside it. In the end, all that was left was a crater with a pool of molten rock at the bottom.

"Should I be disappointed that the Frost Basilisk was too weak or that the SSSR card was too strong?" I wondered aloud. "Anyway, this just goes to show I should try *not* to use any SSSR cards or higher while questing up on the surface."

I sighed at the dismal scene in front of me. "I wanted to cash in all that Frost Basilisk loot as my last act before leaving this dungeon city for good. But on the bright side, at least I now know which cards not to use."

"This is true," agreed Nemumu. "Besides, it's all that overgrown iguana's fault for getting destroyed without even leaving a single scale behind to show for it! It's not your fault for using an SSSR card on it, Lord Dark!"

"We originally came here to farm ice gems, old bean," Gold pointed out. "That Frost Basilisk was never part of the plan, so it turning into a puddle of goo is no skin off our noses."

Both Nemumu and Gold tried to console me in their own inimitable ways, and I had to admit, Gold did have a point when he said the Frost Basilisk had never been part of our objectives and its

appearance had been nothing more than a bonus to us. When I weighed up what I'd learned about the cards I'd tested against the lost loot, it was more of a positive outcome than a negative one. Yes, the Frost Basilisk had been an unexpected surprise, but its defeat served as a good place to call it a day, so we gathered up all the ice gems and headed out of the dungeon. We cashed in the gems at the guild for the last time and departed the city, the dwarf receptionist seeing us off with tears in her eyes.

With my Fool's Mask still firmly affixed to my face, I paused briefly and turned to Nemumu and Gold. "Looks like our next port of call is the Elven Queendom capital and this 'Great Mystery Tower' we keep hearing about."

"Right-o, milord. Let's get a shifty on then," Gold said.

"I'd follow you into the very depths of Hell itself, Lord Dark!" Nemumu stated. On hearing their eager replies, I turned and set off once more in the direction of the Elven Queendom capital.

Chapter 6: Queen Lif VII

The supreme ruler of the Elven Queendom, Queen Lif VII, sat on her throne facing a long conference table in the palace's council chamber, with the chancellor of the queendom to her left, Hardy, the commander of the White Knights, on her right, and high-ranking officials and knight commanders lining both sides of the rectangular table. Unsurprisingly, the agenda for that day concerned the Great Mystery Tower. The chancellor—a middle-aged male elf who wore a monocle—outlined the present situation with an air of urgency.

“Due to high-level monsters slaughtering adventurers who set foot in the forest, we haven't been able to gain any useful information on the tower,” the chancellor explained. “If those same monsters were to exit the forest and block the main road to the port, goods traffic would be disrupted once more, and our people would inevitably suffer because of it! With that said, I believe now is the time to deploy the White Knights. They have the ability to make sure those monsters are eliminated and they can gather some proper intelligence on that tower!”

Once he'd said his piece, the chancellor casually readjusted his monocle and sat back. Even though he was advanced in years—and had the wrinkles to show for it—the chancellor still retained many of the handsome features inherent to male elves, and his visage could be described as that of a suave, debonair gentleman, rather than your typical graybeard. In fact, if he did something about his somewhat irritable nature, he'd be the type of silver fox who would catch the eye of women who were into courtly men.

The chancellor gazed across the table at Hardy in the same way one might if they were trying to stare down a bitter rival. The saturnine commander ignored the pointed glare from the man opposite and raised his hand to offer his thoughts on the situation.

“I can painfully empathize with how much the chancellor does not wish Her Majesty the Queen's subjects to suffer any further in this time of crisis,” Hardy said in his usual steady and subdued tone. “But it would be reckless to dispatch the White Knights on a mission before we know the conditions on the ground. One might even doubt the wisdom of making such a suggestion.”

“Well, if the commander of our queendom's *elite* White Knights himself adopts such a fainthearted position, then I suppose he is left

with no choice but to also doubt my very reasonable suggestion,” the chancellor retorted obliquely.

“The chancellor has served in government for far longer than I have, so I expect he would have no trouble preparing official documents without knowing exact figures, but I believe it is somewhat unfair to expect us to perform a similar task on the battlefield,” Hardy responded. “Accurate intelligence is as valuable to us as the ability to recognize an enemy, or our ears to hear danger approaching. What the chancellor is suggesting is tantamount to making us swing our swords wildly while we do not have the use of all five of our senses. Even the most powerful blade cannot slay an enemy if it does not know where to strike.”

The chancellor could only respond with a choked grunt of annoyance. Hardy had basically told the chancellor that, while he and the rest of his bureaucrat buddies might be experts in cooking the books to unjustly enrich themselves, the battlefield was far removed from clerical work and accurate information was a matter of life and death, so a civilian like him with no military experience should back off.

The chancellor’s face flushed and he shook with indignation at Hardy’s words. So why, you may ask, was there so much tension between these two? The answer lay in their disparate views on the elves’ matriarchal society, where only women were able to ascend to the throne. The chancellor was a leading figure in a faction of elves that didn’t agree with the status quo and sought to upset the present societal order, with the end goal being to grant males complete dominion over the land. On the other hand, Hardy was a principal figure of the traditionalist faction, which made him the chancellor’s political enemy. Since the chancellor had no hope of beating Hardy through brute force, he instead opted to chip away at Hardy’s authority and influence whenever an opportunity presented itself. For this reason, Hardy and the chancellor frequently clashed in these meetings, and the Great Mystery Tower served as just one more pretext on which to engage in another round of court politics.

After hearing both sides of the debate, Queen Lif snapped shut the folding fan she was holding, the clack echoing around the council chamber and drawing everyone’s attention to her. “I agree unconditionally with the declaration put forth by the commander of the White Knights. I shall now issue this decree in my name: we shall increase the reward money being offered for information regarding the tower in order to attract a higher caliber of adventurer.”

Once Queen Lif had handed down this edict, the council meeting adjourned and the officials from the relevant branches of government rushed to fulfill the royal decree. Amid the hubbub, the chancellor

fired a parting shot meant for Hardy's ears and his alone.

"Mama's boy."

Pretending not to hear, Hardy wordlessly left the chamber and headed off to another room in the palace, ignoring the electricity that was practically bouncing off his back from the chancellor's disgruntled glare.



Hardy eventually reached his intended destination: Queen Lif's private chambers. He casually strolled in like someone who'd been in this exclusive inner sanctum countless times before, and made himself comfortable on one of the sofas. Not long after, Queen Lif entered as well, but instead of standing to attention in the presence of Her Majesty as was customary, Hardy simply greeted his nation's supreme ruler with a nonchalant wave of his hand.

"I must thank you for standing up for me, mother," Hardy said. "You have saved me from being forced to strike out into that forest armed with no useful intelligence."

"Oh, there's no need to thank me, dear," Queen Lif cooed. "I'm not going to let them send my little Hardy-Wardy off anywhere dangerous."

The reason why Hardy was the principal figure of the traditionalist faction was because he was Queen Lif's son by blood. If Light had turned out to be a Master, the queendom would've rewarded Sasha by giving her Hardy's hand in marriage. But males had absolutely no claim to the throne in the queendom, and despite being the royal scion, Hardy received no special treatment due to his status. Hardy had earned the title of White Knight Commander by himself, as a Submaster who had outclassed his peers.

With her back to Hardy, Queen Lif set about preparing the tea, her bubblyness while doing so quite unbecoming of her age and status.

"I do not know what to do about the chancellor," Hardy grumbled behind her. "He is a capable official, but he is too intent on opposing the queenship. We may need to put him in his place by force, or if it is necessary, have him relinquish his position altogether."

Queen Lif giggled softly. "You're such a meanie. I feel awful for that poor chancellor, knowing my little Hardykins is on his case."

"Mother, this is hardly a laughing matter," the White Knights' commander said with a sigh.

Although Hardy was unquestionably the most powerful person in the queendom, the queen felt free to do and say what she wished around him on account of her being his mother and his ally. From the chancellor's perspective, there was no way he could get rid of Hardy by force, even if he banded together with any number of like-minded

confederates to accomplish the task. If the chancellor were ever to attempt such a power play, there would be nothing stopping Hardy from straight-up killing him in retaliation. But Hardy was a major thorn in the chancellor's side due to the White Knight commander serving as the beating heart of the queendom's national defense, so the chancellor felt he had to do something about him. Therefore, absent the possibility of a direct physical confrontation, the chancellor was left with no choice but to needle Hardy in his perceived weak spots, and the White Knight commander was quickly reaching the end of his rope.

After making sure the tea was just the way her son liked it, Queen Lif poured some into Hardy's cup personally before setting it down in front of him and taking a seat on the couch opposite.

"As long as you're around, schnookums, that silly chancellor poses no problem to us," Queen Lif stated. "No, I'm afraid the *real* issue is that mystery tower. They say the monsters have been restless ever since that thing appeared. If we don't do something about that tower, it will shake the very foundations of this nation, and we simply can't be having that."

Hardy allowed himself a brief pause before offering his thoughts. "Do you think a dark lord walks the world once more?"

"We certainly can't rule out that possibility," Queen Lif admitted. "If that is indeed the case, it means a hero must have been born among the inferiors."

"Because only inferiors can give birth to heroes, huh?" said Hardy.

Kyto the wayward elf had referred to himself as a "legendary hero" because he claimed to carry the blood of an ancient champion, but in reality, the powers of a legendary hero could only awaken in humans. Historically, no elf had emerged as an all-powerful savior to their race, no matter how closely an elf was related to an actual legendary hero. Furthermore, it was believed that these legendary heroes were likely also Masters.

Hardy heaved another deep sigh. "We have to either bring a Master over to our side or kill it. If we were to attempt to wipe out all the inferiors so that no other Masters could be born, we risk them designating one of us as a dark lord and subsequently giving birth to a Master who would end up destroying us all anyway. It is a delicate problem."

Hardy brought his cup of tea up to his lips before continuing. "Mother, what do you think of inferiors?"

"Hm? Whatever do you mean?" Queen Lif said, answering a question with a question.

"I myself see inferiors as vermin that bring only harm to this world," Hardy said. "Their kind has a long history of birthing Masters

that jeopardize the continued existence of the rest of the races. We should unite with the seven other nations to exterminate the inferiors before they can give birth to another Master. They are just like vermin; the only good inferior is a dead one.”

Queen Lif sat in silence for a moment before speaking her mind. “I know how you feel all too well, my little Hardykins,” she said. “It’s true, inferiors *are* no better than vermin. But you know full well we can’t wipe out every single inferior in the world. At least not before another Master is born. It’s just not possible.”

This time, it was the queen who finished up her remarks with a deep sigh. Launching an extermination mission to locate and annihilate every human living on the mainland was nothing short of impossible. Not only were there too many humans to kill all of them in one fell swoop, there was no guarantee the other seven nations would actively contribute toward such a task. Of course, none of these concerns would matter if the queendom had all the time in the world to wipe out the humans, but exterminating a whole race in such a short amount of time was too impractical.

Hardy wasn’t ignorant of these facts; he was simply venting his frustrations to his mother. As if to take his mind off his pointless fuming, Hardy drained the last of his tea, then all of a sudden, he remembered something.

“They *did* find a potential Master about three years ago, did they not?” he recalled.

“Yes. In the end, it turned out the boy wasn’t a Master, but we had him killed anyway, just to be on the safe side,” Queen Lif told him. “We haven’t found any other potential Masters since. What of it?”

“I was just imagining what I would have done if I had been part of that mission,” said Hardy. “If a Master or potential Master were standing before me, I would not kill him immediately. I would carve the words ‘Inferiors are vermin’ across his torso before slaying him. It would be the perfect opportunity to release some of my pent-up bitterness toward that repugnant race.”

“Oh, Hardykins,” giggled Queen Lif. “We can’t have a knight commander like you carrying out such a lowly job.”

Hardy uncharacteristically snickered in response. “I was merely voicing a pipe dream of mine, mother. I only wish that there was some way to make it a reality. I do wonder how hideous a Master or potential Master might look.”

At the very same moment that Hardy and the queen were delighting in conversing about this rather gruesome subject, as fate would have it, the potential Master they were referring to arrived in the Elven Queendom capital with his party. A boy wearing a fool’s mask and a black hood and wielding a staff strolled into the city’s

Adventurers' Guild, with a tall knight in ostentatiously golden armor and a strikingly beautiful tanned girl whose mouth was covered by her scarf in tow. The trio made for a truly eye-catching sight as they entered the Elven Queendom guild.



As I walked through the doors of the guild, I couldn't help turning my head this way and that, marveling at the extravagance on show.

"Wow, even the Adventurers' Guild is lavish in the Elven Queendom's capital," I said.

"You can say that again, milord. This place is posher than a great hall," Gold said, sounding every bit as impressed as me. "I suppose the décor inside a guild building is entirely dependent on what country we're in, what?"

"Lord Dark! Lord Dark!" Nemumu cried out. "They have a quest board here! Seems they operate like any other guild!"

Nemumu was pointing at a bulletin board, looking as excited as a puppy that had just spotted a squirrel. The end of her scarf was even bouncing up and down like a wagging tail. My eyes followed Nemumu's finger to the board, and right smack in the center of it was a quest relating to the "Great Mystery Tower." Because it was past noon, the guild was nearly totally devoid of adventurers, so I was able to read the details of the quest without anyone walking in between me and the posting.

Peering at the poster through my mask, I nodded several times as my eyes scanned down the page. "It's like we heard. They're offering a handsome reward just for bringing them any information about the mystery tower."

Gold guffawed. "Looks as though you picked a jolly good time to move to a new city, milord!"

"I've got nothing against farming in a dungeon," I replied. "But that last one had those awful killings hanging over it, and it was getting boring just doing the same thing day after day."

Of course, my party hadn't *really* switched cities because we'd gotten tired of hunting yetis. This entire conversation was a cover to make it *look* like we'd come to the capital after hearing about this so-called "Great Mystery Tower." In reality, we'd arrived here disguised as adventurers to get my revenge on Sasha, with a side objective of raising our ranks as questers while we were at it.

No adventurer had been able to get anywhere near the mystery tower Ellie had created. This created a golden opportunity for my party to waltz up to the tower and bring back the information the queendom wanted on it, thereby propelling us up through the ranks with ease. According to Ellie's plan, this would help lure Sasha and

the White Knights into our trap. I wasn't exactly sure how that was supposed to work, but I'd handed the reins to Ellie for this revenge plot, so I dutifully followed her directions and stopped by the queendom's guild.

Thinking I was done with this simple task, I spun on my heels and made to leave. "Now that we know there's a quest up, we should go find an inn before it gets dark—"

"Hey there, honey. How are you such a perfect ten?"

Two young elf adventurers were suddenly standing in front of Nemumu, and as was typical for their race, they both looked like the ultimate pretty boys. They were around 175 centimeters tall, and they boasted perfectly balanced physiques, but they sounded incredibly shallow, and I could tell just by the way they were looking at us that they considered us beneath them—other than Nemumu, that is.

The elf pair continued hitting on Nemumu while ignoring me and Gold completely. "In all our years of questing, we've never seen a girl as cute as you, human or otherwise. You got a name, cutie-pie?"

The last thing Nemumu was going to do was humor these pretty boys. "How *dare* you insolent maggots interrupt Lord Dark while he is speaking!"

"Insolent"? Is that even a word?" teased Pretty Boy One. "Oh man, you're cute *and* funny. We saw you checking out the quest board and were wondering if you wanted to hook up and form a party?"

"And just so you know, our power levels are over 150, so you'll be nice and safe with us, and treated like the princess you are!" said Pretty Boy Two.

"Besides, you *know* us elves are way handsomer than any human you'll ever meet," said Pretty Boy One. "Stick with us, and we'll fill you with more hottie power than you can handle."

As the bulging veins on her forehead could attest to, Nemumu was fuming by this point, while Gold had felt the need to clamp his hand over his mouth—or well, the part of his helmet covering his mouth—as he shuddered with barely suppressed laughter at the phrase "hottie power." Thankfully, Nemumu appeared to only be moderately pissed off, because if she'd been well and truly enraged by the behavior of these two elves, the intimidating energy that would exude from the Level 5000 assassin would easily have the power to stop their hearts, as well as the hearts of everyone else in the guild at that present moment—aside from mine and Gold's, of course.

To avoid that happening, Nemumu kept her temper in check and refused the elves' invitation in a calm voice that only hinted at the anger that lay beneath. "As long as I'm with Lord Dark, I have no intention of speaking with you cretins or forming a party with you. Now leave us alone."

“Lord Dark? That’s one weird name,” Pretty Boy One remarked. “Are you talking about this inferior kid who’s with you?”

“You can’t be serious,” said Pretty Boy Two. “You’ll be *way* safer and better off with us than with this dumb kid! Babe, ya got two elves making a pass at you, and that practically *never* happens to girls like you. You’d have to be totally nuts to turn down this opportunity of a lifetime!”

The two pretty boy elves showed no sign of giving up, and as we still had to look for a place to stay for the night, I interrupted the conversation by thrusting my staff in between the elves and Nemumu. “Excuse me, sirs, but Nemumu is a valuable member of this party, so if you don’t mind, could you maybe *not* try to recruit her away from us?”

“L-Lord Dark!” As soon as I intervened on Nemumu’s behalf, the pissed-off look on her face suddenly melted away and was replaced by an expression you’d be more likely to see on a lovestruck maiden, complete with reddened cheeks and moistened eyes. Any jury in the world would be able to tell just by looking at her that Nemumu preferred me to the elves making a pass at her. Realizing they’d lost out to a “dumb kid,” the smiles from the elves’ faces disappeared and their perfectly trimmed eyebrows arched upward.

“Just who does this goddamn inferior think he is?” said Pretty Boy One, his voice quivering with quiet rage.

“Ya better back off and stay in your lane, little boy!” Pretty Boy Two warned, raising his fist. Nemumu and Gold hastily scrambled to get in the way to protect me, but I quickly called their names and made it clear from my tone that they were to stay exactly where they were. With a swift movement of my hand, I caught the elf’s fist.



“Thunder Arrow,” I uttered, unleashing the Rare gacha card through the offending elf’s fist and making him screech in pain. Since he claimed he was Level 150, I was pretty sure this attack would only shock him rather than outright killing him, and he proved me right by collapsing to the floor, stunned but still alive.

“Wh-What the hell was that?” the elf cried. “Did that inferior kid seriously just catch my punch *and* use combat magic without even chanting a spell? That’s insane!”

The elf sounded more shocked than angry, and with good reason. Normally, only a veteran mage would be able to perform unvoiced magic, yet here was a human kid who looked no more than thirteen, who was not only able to easily block a punch one-handed, he was able to cast an unvoiced spell to boot. The elf receptionists who’d witnessed the whole scene looked every bit as surprised as the elf on the receiving end of the spell.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us, we need to find an inn before it gets dark,” I said to the pretty boy elves. “Nemumu, Gold, let’s go.”

“Right behind you, Lord Dark!” Nemumu said obediently.

“It was nice meeting you lads,” Gold managed to get out in between fits of giggles. “‘Hottie Power’ indeed...”

I started striding resolutely toward the exit, and the two elves scrambled out of my way as if I was some kind of freak of nature they’d encountered. Nemumu followed close behind, a beaming smile plastered across her face and exuding the flowery aura of a princess who’d just been rescued by a gallant prince. Gold brought up the rear, still sniggering at his snide parting shot.

I didn’t anticipate that little run-in with those elves, but I think it’s safe to say my party made a grand entrance, I thought to myself. And we were able to verify the guild had issued the ‘mystery tower’ quest. Time to move on to our next objective, I think...

While I went over this mental checklist for my own personal mission, I strode out through the doors of the guild building and headed off into the city.

Chapter 7: Intertwined Schemes

“Sir Mikhael, I have decided to become an adventurer again.”

“What?”

Sasha was once again enjoying her regularly scheduled tea date on the lawn with Mikhael when she dropped this unexpected news on her husband-to-be. Sasha needed to get a closer look at the tower if she wanted to murder Light with her own two hands, but she kept the real reason for her decision to resume her old lifestyle to herself and spun a pack of lies to her fiancé.

“As the betrothed of the vice-commander of the White Knights, I cannot just sit around and do nothing while our queendom is in danger,” Sasha stated. “I wish to contribute to my nation by investigating that mystery tower using the scouting skills I honed during my time in the Concord of the Tribes. So I must ask that we postpone any future tea dates for the time being.”

Of course, she wasn't really questing to the tower for the sake of her nation or for Mikhael. Ever since Sasha had seen the message Light had left for her in the alley, the elf had vowed to end the life of that wretched human herself, thereby eliminating this threat to the blissful life she'd carved out for herself for good.

I'll never let that brat destroy my happiness, Sasha thought, teacup in hand. Even if Mikhael were to protest her decision, she planned to win him over by invoking her patriotism for her nation and her position as his bride-to-be.

But Mikhael's reaction was much better than she'd expected. “I really admire your attitude, Miss Sasha. You refuse to hide behind your privileged position, instead volunteering to head to the front lines for the good of our nation. As the vice-commander of the White Knights, and as your fiancé, I have nothing but the deepest of respect for you.”

“Y-You didn't have to say all *that*.” Sasha hadn't been prepared for Mikhael to back her so completely in this decision, much less heap praise on her for it. She blushed and shrunk a little in her seat. “I'm only doing what *I* want to do, nothing more.”

Even while hiding her ulterior motive from her fiancé, Sasha had a weakness for being flattered by a princely-looking soldier who also presented himself as an intellectual, which meant she couldn't help blushing at his unexpected praise. Not only was Mikhael royalty, he

was exactly Sasha's type.

While Sasha sat there looking sheepish, underneath his smile, Mikhael was silently contemplating his own motives. *I never thought she would be one to volunteer to recon the tower. She did have the skills and incredible luck to kill that potential Master, so if I am very lucky, she might end up being the first to bring back some useful intelligence on that tower. If she can accomplish that, it will be a real feather in our caps.*

While Mikhael was related to the queen, he was only one of the extended family, which was ultimately nothing to write home about. But since he had been born a Submaster, his power level had shot up rapidly and it wasn't long before he'd reached the rank of vice-commander. Unfortunately for him, he'd hit a dead end in terms of his career progression, because the person occupying the rung above was the juggernaut known as Hardy the Silent. Since Hardy was the son of the queen, he had a more direct line to the last Master, which in turn meant he had inherited more of his ancestor's powers. So much so, in fact, his power level had surpassed 3000, making him the strongest fighter in the entire Elven Queendom.

Commander Hardy has everything I do not, Mikhael mused. Hardy was unquestionably stronger than Mikhael and everyone lauded the White Knights' leader for his position as the mightiest elf in the land. It was no exaggeration to say that Mikhael was inferior to Hardy in every respect. To put it another way, Mikhael could only attain the status, the glory, the fame, and—perhaps most importantly—the title he had always longed for once Hardy was out of the picture.

I am well above Level 2500 as it is, but it is unlikely I will go any higher. I am also unlikely to beat Hardy in a normal fight. But a fight over status and authority is another matter entirely.

Mikhael had absolutely no qualms about this arranged marriage to Sasha—in fact, he welcomed it. His betrothal to her presented an opportunity to rise above Hardy in the political sphere.

Not only did Sasha eliminate that potential Master, she is now taking it upon herself to investigate the mystery tower. If she succeeds, with a few more contributions to the queendom and if everything falls into place, any daughter we sire will have a very strong chance of ascending to the throne!

If Hardy himself had been married with a daughter, that girl would be next in line for the throne. But at this moment in time, Hardy remained unmarried, and the prospect of him siring a daughter was completely up in the air. Mikhael could conceivably collude with the chancellor while building up a commendable track record with Sasha, and those assets could very well pave the way to his future daughter taking the crown.

While it was true that Mikhael wasn't a part of the main line of succession, he still had royal blood. If his daughter took the throne,

and if he had her ear, he could attain the influence of a king from the shadows. In that scenario, Mikhael would handily come out ahead of Hardy in terms of his grip on power, even if he remained unable to beat Hardy in a physical contest.

The mere thought of winning the long game and getting the better of the great Hardy the Silent sent shivers of joy coursing through Mikhael. *But the track record we have right now is not good enough. Of course, if through her own devices, Sasha was able to solve the nation's mystery tower problem, that would be a huge coup for my aspirations. Though realistically, that might be hoping for too much.*

Beneath their serene smiles, both Sasha and Mikhael were lost in their own personal machinations. Neither breathed a word of their secret agendas as they continued their lighthearted conversation.

"Miss Sasha, my only regret is that I am unable to do a thing to help you in your distinguished undertaking," Mikhael said to his fiancée. "As you well know, I am the vice-commander of the White Knights, so I must remain ready to respond instantly to any order passed down by our superiors in the queendom. But since I am your fiancé, I wish to at least support you in spirit."

"Sir Mikhael, your support means the world to me," said Sasha.

At a glance, the sight of these two beautiful love birds lifting each other up in this way was picture-perfect, though what was really going on inside their heads was a different story altogether.



Early the next morning, my party left the inn we were staying at and went to sign up for the "Great Mystery Tower" quest down at the guild, before making our way to the camptown on the edge of the forest to the west. When we got there, the place was bustling with other adventurers, soldiers, merchants, prostitutes, and plenty of other folk with a wide variety of occupations. Adventurers and soldiers definitely made up the majority though. The soldiers' presence was largely down to two reasons: they were there to keep order, for one, but since the monsters were unlikely to come anywhere near this large gathering of adventurers of varying power levels, the camptown also served as a rest stop for them.

We'd known in advance that this tent colony had been set up for the convenience of all the adventurers who were attempting the near-impossible task of doing recon on the "Great Mystery Tower." We'd received the intel from some of our operatives who had been active on the surface world for about a year by this point. I immediately recognized those very same operatives in the crush of people, because well, it wasn't hard to spot a group of human adventurers with hairstyles that looked like a rooster's comb. I knew they had seen us

too, but they acted like they didn't know us as they made preparations to go hiking through the forest again.

I was able to pick those guys out in a crowd no problem, thanks to their mohawks, I thought to myself. I think that hair suits them, since they stand out and make a lasting impression on anyone who sees them. I wonder why Mei and my other lieutenants were so against the idea of me having a mohawk...

I'd once brought up the Mohawks' collective hairstyle with my inner circle in the Abyss, but before I could even finish my sentence, all the girls had cried out in unison that I should *never* try to copy their hairdo, and that my hair was fine just the way it was. Even Nazuna had dropped her usual happy-go-lucky attitude to caution me against getting a haircut like that. And believe me, I had no plans of styling my hair into a mohawk, but I couldn't help thinking—like I had when I'd first raised the subject—that their unique hairstyle was a useful tool in getting them noticed and building up their reputations as adventurers. But my deputies had implored me not to even dream of it with such menacing looks in their eyes that I ended up not giving my honest opinion on the hairstyle.

While I reminisced about this long-ago episode, I scanned the camptown and spotted the two pretty boy elves we'd ran into the day before.

"Tch, it's those no-good elves again," Nemumu muttered. "Why do they have to keep staring at us like creeps? Just say the word, Lord Dark, and I'll make them pay dearly for their disrespectful attitudes by lopping off their heads."

Not only were the two elves glaring at us, they were also leering at Nemumu's face, chest, and thighs with a mixture of sadistic lust and carnal desire. I guessed it was this "special attention" that had irritated Nemumu so much.



Gold, on the other hand, calmly leaned over and whispered a bit of advice in my ear. “Milord, my gut’s telling me those rotters are planning to ambush us once we enter the forest. Now, I’m not at all worried about those lads beating us in a fight, but do we really want to let them roam about freely?”

Our objective that day was to meet up with Ellie and the others at the Great Tower (my original name for the superstructure). Gold was suggesting that the two pretty boy elves might tail us and end up witnessing us “colluding” with the tower dwellers.

Nemumu picked up on Gold’s forewarning and chimed in with her own suggestion. “Lord Dark, give me the order and I’ll immediately go and separate their heads from their shoulders.”

Incidentally, Nemumu was still thoroughly grossed out by the two ogling elves. I was pretty sure the Level 5000 Assassin’s Blade could behead those idiots without anyone in the camptown crowd noticing, but even so, I shook my head at this idea.

“Not that I doubt your skills to do that undetected, Nemumu, but you’ll just start a panic if heads mysteriously start flying off in this crowd. We can take care of those two in the forest, though only if they attack us first.”

“F-Forgive me, Lord Dark,” said a humbled-sounding Nemumu. “I wasn’t thinking ahead.”

“It’s fine,” I replied, going through the same old routine as always. “I’m not a woman like you, so I can’t even imagine how creeped out you are by them staring at you. If you want, you can stand behind me and Gold.”

Of course, the blushing Nemumu was beside herself at my offer. “L-Lord Dark”—she made a noise that sounded a bit like a muffled squeal of delight—“you’re far too kind to me!”

Nemumu’s beaming face was so captivating, it didn’t only draw the gaze of the two elves, but also the stares of every single other male adventurer within eyeline. Meanwhile, Gold was guffawing at the spectacle.

“Are you really getting all worked up over those two cads making googly eyes at your ironing board of a chest, m’girl?” Gold chuckled. “And here I am, wondering what the bally hell there is to gain from staring at those tiny bee stings!”

“Gold! I am *not* an ironing board! I’m normal-sized, dammit!” This time, the redness of Nemumu’s face was purely down to her fury rather than affection. She kicked Gold repeatedly in his armored shin, though of course, this didn’t cause him any pain and only succeeded in eliciting more belly laughs from the golden-armored knight.

All of a sudden, Gold stopped chortling and a deadly serious

expression appeared on Nemumu's beet-red face. I muttered an order to the pair, taking care not to betray any emotion in my voice. "Gold. Nemumu. This is not the time to engage her," I said. "That goes for me too."

"Right-o, milord," said Gold.

"Your word is my command, Lord Dark," Nemumu said obediently.

All of our voices carried a harder edge because we'd sensed a carriage arriving in the camptown and it was obvious to us that it wasn't any old carriage. When it pulled up in the street running alongside the camptown, two male elves—one blond, the other with silver hair—were the first to disembark. They were wearing well-worn armor, and they immediately scanned their surroundings to confirm this was a safe place to stop. The two of them were obviously high-ranking adventurers from what I could see.

Next to alight from the carriage was the person the two elves were escorting: Sasha, who was the target of our revenge plot. As soon as I caught sight of her, I heard my back teeth grinding against each other. The last time I laid eyes on her was when I left her that message in the alleyway, and before that, when she cruelly left me for dead in the Abyss three years ago. It would have been easy to give in to my emotions and kill Sasha where she stood, but I'd only be doing her a favor. After all, if I took her out here, she wouldn't get to taste one iota of the grief and despair I'd felt on that terrible day. A quick death would be too good for this snake of a woman, so I bit my tongue and stood down.

The three of us turned our backs to Sasha and started discussing how we would approach our own trek into the woods. "Nemumu, you'll be our vanguard," I said. "Make sure you check the lay of the land as we get nearer to our destination."

"Understood," Nemumu said. "Does that mean I should hack a path through the forest that takes us as far away from those monsters as I can, Lord Dark?"

"Yeah, please," I answered. "Gold, you take the rear."

"Right-o, milord," Gold said. "I'll be sure to cover all our backsides, what?"

Of course, this whole conversation was ad-libbed since we'd have looked out of place if we didn't discuss our plan of attack like the other adventurers at the camp. But despite our best efforts to ignore Sasha, our heightened senses told us she and her crew were coming our way.

"We need to talk, human!" Sasha said to me sharply.

I slowly turned and addressed my nemesis for the first time in three long years. "Is there some problem?"

Despite the years-long separation, Sasha's appearance hadn't changed a bit. Her flaxen locks still cascaded all the way down her back while her long elf ears jutted out from under her blonde mane. If she had been human, it would have been possible to spot at least some signs of aging, but elves truly were a different species in that regard.

Still managing to keep my anger in check, I coolly added, "We were in the middle of strategizing for our quest. Is there something we can help you with?"

"I need you to remove that strange-looking mask so I can get a good look at your face, kid," Sasha stated, not even pretending to care if I was busy or not.

Looks like the SSR Fool's Mask is working as intended, I thought. The gacha item wasn't just a mask; it was able to create illusions and prevent people from being able to recognize the wearer. Even though my voice remained undisguised, Sasha had no idea who I was. To be fair, it had been three years since we'd last talked.

Nemumu jumped into the conversation, matching my slightly indignant tone and, like me, suppressing any anger she felt. "Didn't you hear what he said? We were in the middle of planning our quest. Who interrupts a conversation without so much as an apology? Where's your common sense?"

"I wasn't talking to *you*!" Sasha yelled at her. "Just because you are somewhat pretty for an inferior doesn't give you the right to take that snotty attitude with me!"

"I'm not being snotty at all," Nemumu replied, making sure her voice stayed calm and even. "I know plenty of people who are more attractive than me, so I couldn't act snotty if I wanted to. Just because you have no confidence in your own looks doesn't mean you should take it out on me."

Sasha's face flushed at being slyly mocked by Nemumu. "You inferior cow!"

Nemumu was actually just stating the facts as she saw them, rather than intentionally trying to rile Sasha. Like she said, there were plenty of women in the Abyss who were every bit as beautiful as Nemumu, if not more so. There were, of course, my four lieutenants, as well as the fairy maids, who were all very attractive. But when compared to Sasha, it was clear Nemumu would win out, and you didn't even have to take my word for it. If we were to conduct a poll among the adventurers in the camptown on who was prettier, Nemumu or Sasha, Nemumu would likely win hands down, and probably about nine to one, even after taking into account personal preferences.

The reason Sasha was red to the tips of her ears was likely because she knew in her heart of hearts that Nemumu outclassed her

in the beauty stakes, and she had no comeback to Nemumu's comments. I silently drew a bit of satisfaction from Sasha's reaction.

"Miss Sasha, please take it easy," one of Sasha's male escorts said to her.

Sasha and Nemumu's squabble was a couple of decibels louder than it really should have been, and the two women were drawing confused looks from the other adventurers nearby. Sasha's escorts tried to calm her down, but because they were much lower down on the social ladder than her, all they could do was timidly raise their hands and plead with her to stop. Of course, it also took a certain level of courage to intervene in a verbal spat between two women, and that was courage they didn't possess.

I could tell Nemumu and Gold were at pains to keep their emotions in check while Sasha—the literal target of our current revenge plot—was within arm's reach. It also looked like they were so focused on managing their feelings, they had little scope to do much else. In any case, I felt I couldn't really afford to draw any more attention to us, so I decided to put an end to this little confrontation.

"Okay, you win. I'll take off my mask," I said to Sasha. "But I must warn you, I wear this mask to cover up a horrible burn I got in a fire. It's not something any decent person should have to see, so are you sure about this?"

"The betrothed of the vice-commander of the White Knights is ordering you to take off that mask," Sasha said haughtily. "So quit stalling and do as you're told!"

"Well, if you say so."

Sasha had practically been shouting at me by this point, so to avoid creating an even bigger scene, I removed the mask. Sasha took one look at my exposed face, then immediately shrieked and gagged, even feeling the need to place a hand in front of her mouth to stop herself from regurgitating bile. This reaction was because underneath my mask, I had a large, unsightly burn scar charbroiled across my face. At least, that was the lingering illusion left behind by the SSR Fool's Mask.

"That's *disgusting!*" Sasha spat. Even the blond and silver-haired escorts standing behind her had covered their mouths and were averting their gaze. "C-Cover up that nasty face of yours right now!" Sasha bawled as soon as she'd managed to catch her breath.

I quietly did as I was told and reaffixed the mask over my face. *It'd be nice if she could make her mind up over whether she wants to see my face or not,* I thought, grinning inwardly. Sasha tried to fix me with a glare again, but the memory of my burn scar was too fresh in her mind and she went pale again almost immediately.

"Don't you *ever* show people something so *repulsive* again!" Sasha

snapped. "This is exactly why I despise you loathsome inferiors!"

Sasha spun on her heels and walked off, her two lackeys trotting along behind her, trying to smooth things over. "M-Miss Sasha, please calm down!" I heard one say.

"That kid couldn't have been Light," Sasha muttered under her breath as she stomped away, though my ears were sharp enough to pick up her words regardless. "It's been nearly three years since I last saw him, and inferiors his age would've matured a lot more in that time."

So she *had* come over to talk to me because I resembled the boy she'd tried to kill in the Abyss. *Back then, she was really good at pretending that humans were her equals*, I thought. *I never thought her true self would be this vile*. Maybe she'd found it easy to act more like an ally to me because she only had to deal with me for a short amount of time. Or maybe it was my fault I was so easy to trick, since I was just a twelve-year-old rookie adventurer at the time, fresh off the farm. *I must've been really naive not to see through her act*, I decided. This encounter had made it all the more clear to me just how much I wanted to get revenge on this two-faced, backstabbing elf.

I kept my murderous gaze fixed on Sasha's receding figure a little while longer before turning my attention back to Gold and Nemumu. "Now that that busybody has gone, let's get back to our plan," I said. "I want to hit the forest as soon as possible so we don't waste any more time than we already have."

"Mhm. Right you are, old bean," said Gold.

"I can't believe that woman ate up your precious time like that," Nemumu huffed. "I agree. We need to wrap this up quickly and head into the forest."

As I explained before, by this point, we were just ad-libbing for anyone who might be listening in. Ellie and Aoyuki had already given us all the information we'd need on the forest, so there was no way we were going to get lost on our way to the tower. Our only assignment on entering the woods was to rendezvous with the team of escorts Ellie was sending out to covertly meet up with us halfway. But thanks to Sasha's interference, we'd drawn too much unwanted attention to ourselves, so we had no choice but to act as natural and inconspicuous as possible in an attempt to ward off any more prying eyes. To that end, we imitated run-of-the-mill adventurers and mapped out our plan of attack, right up until the point where we actually began our hike into the woods. Nemumu was our vanguard, just as we'd "planned," and we set off for the rendezvous point deep into the woods.



"Did you really think you could get away from us?!"

“This is payback for yesterday! First, we’re gonna waste the golden rust bucket, and then we’ll torture and kill the inferior bitch and her brat!”

I cast an—albeit unintentionally—pitying eye over the two pretty boy elves. At that particular moment in time, one of them had his sword held aloft, while the other had his bow trained on us, ready to put an arrow in us should we give him cause to. My party and the two elves were facing each other somewhere in the farthest reaches of the forest. The pretty boys had waited until we’d hiked well out of sight of any potential witnesses before launching their ambush—though of course, we’d already known they were tailing us and had been from the moment we’d set foot in the forest. We thought Pretty Boys One and Two would eventually give up on stalking us the deeper we got into the forest, but to their credit, they’d stuck it out like a couple of guys possessed, until they’d eventually spotted the perfect opportunity to reveal themselves.

Gold and Nemumu joined me in gazing at the elves with a mix of bafflement and fascination, all three of us staring at them the same way you’d look at a couple of toy poodles snarling at a full-grown mountain lion. We were at a total loss for words, which seemed to have the effect of boosting the confidence of the two elves.

“Looks like these losers are too scared to say anything!” Pretty Boy One mocked, angling the blade of his sword in such a way that it reflected the sun rays.

“Maybe they’ve finally realized who the hell they’re messing with,” Pretty Boy Two jeered, his evil grin matching his partner’s. “Come on now, at least beg for your lives! We might even let you walk away if you do a convincing job of it!”

This peeved Gold and Nemumu enough to make them inch their fingers toward their weapons.

“Milord,” Gold prompted.

“Lord Dark...” Nemumu said.

“Well, these guys made their choice, so I guess we might as well go along with it,” I sighed. “But I don’t want to leave a couple of corpses out in the open where they can get us into trouble, so do you think you can get rid of these dinks, Mera?”

The pretty boys looked confused as I hadn’t given that order to Nemumu or Gold, the other members of my party. I’d made the request to someone who was completely unfamiliar to the elves, and perhaps more importantly, unseen.

“Are you completely off your gourd, kid?” Pretty Boy One snarled. “What’s this about? You trying to bluff your way out or something? That ain’t gonna work on us, so say your prayers, Black Fools!”

“Surprised? Yeah, we looked you clowns up!” Pretty Boy Two

leaped in. “They say you made a name for yourself down in that Dwarf Kingdom dungeon. And now you wanna strut around our guild like you own it too? If you had just shut your mouths and licked our boots like the inferiors you are, you wouldn’t have to die here like animals!”

“Keh! Keh! Keh! Keh! Keh!” cackled an ominous voice. “You should’ve taken your own advice, because *no one* mouths off to our master like that!”

“Huh?” mumbled Pretty Boy One.

“What?!” Pretty Boy Two cried.

Someone—or *something*—slapped a hand on the outside shoulders of the elves. The pair turned and found themselves staring up at a very tall woman, who must have been a good two meters tall at the very least. Affixed around the back of her head was a headband fashioned to look like an open mouth lined with jagged teeth, which just happened to resemble her own mouth that was stretched into a grin that seemed to extend all the way from one earlobe to the other. Her hair—which stretched all the way down her back—framed a sublimely elegant face with eyes that flashed crimson. Towering over the elves, the woman looked like an apex predator that was licking its lips at the unlucky prey it had just caught. A special mention should go to the woman’s unusual clothes; she wore a full-length dress that was so long it covered her feet, which you might think was normal enough, but the sleeves of her dress were also long and wide enough to completely swallow both of her hands, which were presently resting on the shoulders of the two elves. The moment the pretty boys turned around, eldritch sounds emanated from these open sleeves, followed soon after by the gory mastication of flesh and bones.

Pretty Boy One screamed, prompting Pretty Boy Two to turn to his partner in confusion. “What the... What’s up with you—gaaah!”

The two elves, who only minutes before were threatening to torture me and my party, were being eaten alive by the woman’s sleeves. The teeth of whatever it was that was in those sleeves gnashed and gnawed their way through the elves’ armor, sinews, and skeletons without spilling a single drop of blood or leaving behind a solitary chunk of flesh. At first, the two elves shrieked from the excruciating pain of the experience, but the sleeves soon silenced their howls by chomping through their shoulders, heads, and the upper halves of their bodies.

In less than a minute, all that was left of the pretty boys was the sword one had been wielding and the bow and quiver of arrows the other had been clutching. The woman then proceeded to also grab these weapons with her sleeves, which happily munched them down like they were after-dinner snacks. Soon, there was nothing left of the

elves: no corpses, no blood, no weapons. Our would-be murderers had been completely wiped off the face of this world.

After the woman had finished removing all trace of the two elves, I apologized to her. "Sorry about that, Mera. I didn't deal with those guys earlier because I thought they'd eventually give up and turn back the farther we hiked into the forest. I never imagined they'd follow us all the way out here. I ended up giving you extra work, didn't I?"

Mera cackled like a crazy heron again. "No need to worry about me, Master! Sure, they tasted gross, but I'll eat a thousand of them, or even a million, if you want me to."

"Appreciate the help, Miss Mera," Gold said. "But I do wish the way you go about dispatching these rotters wasn't so bally ghastly."

"I hate to agree with *him*, but he's got a point," Nemumu concurred.

"What are you so afraid of?" Mera teased, chortling again. "We're all on the same side here, aren't we?"

Mera's laughter seemed to draw three more people out of the shadows: a beautiful maid with red and blue hair, a shirtless muscular young man wearing a coat like a cape, and a cute girl (?) with a musket.

"Master Light, as Mera says, you don't need to apologize," the maid said. "I myself and the rest of us are only here to serve you."

It was the cute girl's turn to speak next, but she just stood there timidly without saying a word, so the musket in her hands spoke for her. "What she wants to say is she thinks Ms. Iceheat is right," the musket said, wriggling slightly in the cute girl's hands and clicking with each word.

"That makes three of us," the young man added. "You got any problem at all, you just gotta ask. I've always got your back, bro, and don't you forget it."

I flashed a smile at Mera and the other three faces I hadn't seen for ages. "Iceheat, Suzu, Jack. It's been a while."

On hearing me say her name, Iceheat briefly flushed and trembled slightly, before swallowing down her emotions and regaining her usual calm, sober demeanor.

"Master Light, forgive me for not properly greeting you yet," Iceheat said and she curtsied. "I, Iceheat, have come with Mera, Suzu, and Jack to receive you."

Iceheat served as one of my maids in the Abyss, but she'd shown up here in her original summoned form as a warrior in a housemaid's outfit with a large gauntlet on each hand. Iceheat's multicolored hair was bunched into pigtails, and one half of it was red while the other half was blue, in keeping with her name.

"I'm still sorry for not dealing with it sooner, guys," I said with a

smile. "After all, I just allowed a couple of weirdos to wander up to us and try to mess with us before we could make it to the rendezvous point."

"Please, it's not your fault," said Iceheat. "The assigned rendezvous point was a destination, nothing more. Suzu made sure there was no one else within a 300-meter radius of us. In fact, we are at fault for not thinking of moving to your position sooner, and I apologize for this oversight."

"I feel your steadfast devotion to me is one of your strong points, Iceheat, but I really mean it. I'm the one who should be apologizing, not you," I said before changing the subject. "Well, anyway, could you lead the way to the Great Tower where Ellie, Aoyuki, and Nazuna are waiting for us?"

"Of course! Follow us!" Iceheat announced, then turned to the cute girl to prompt her to take the lead. "Suzu."

Suzu was shorter than Iceheat and had youthful features. She nodded silently at Iceheat's implied instructions, which caused the maid to wince ever so slightly. Whenever Iceheat spoke directly to her, Suzu wouldn't respond with anything other than a simple nod, which very clearly rubbed the fiercely by-the-book Iceheat the wrong way. Suzu's musket quickly jumped in to placate the maid and defuse the situation.

"Sorry about my partner, Lord Light, Ms. Iceheat," the musket said. "You know how incredibly shy she is."

"It's fine, Lock," I replied, calling the musket by its name.

"Anyway, we should get going. We don't want to make Ellie and the others wait any longer than they have to, right?"

"Of course, Master Light," said Iceheat. "They're right this way."

At my command, my expanded party set off for the tower, with Suzu taking the lead, followed by Nemumu and me, Iceheat walking behind me and slightly to the right, and Mera, Jack, and Gold bringing up the rear.

Gold was chatting away to Jack, sounding unusually excited. "By George! I can't believe you came out to meet us too, Jacks, you old bruiser! You have no idea how bally long I've been waiting to lay eyes on you again!"

"Thank Miss Ellie for that. She suggested I come along," Jack told the golden-armored knight. "But you know full well I can't leave my bros behind. Not after the way you guys have been grinding out here."

Jack was 190 centimeters tall and the only thing he had on his upper half was a red coat that he wore like a cape. Even though Jack was extremely brawny, he had more of a lean muscular physique than a bulky one, and he didn't have an ounce of body fat on him. In addition to this, Jack had one bad habit he had no intention of fixing.

“So Gold, my man, you been doin’ a good job protecting my main bro, the Lightmeister?” This remark of Jack’s elicited death glares from the rest of the party besides Gold, and he turned around and said, “What?”

Jack didn’t address me with a title or some other respectful term like the rest of my allies did, instead opting for something a bit more casual, which tended to draw the ire of my more fawning followers. Yet Jack didn’t let the dirty looks he was getting faze him one bit.

“Hey, bros, lay off on the old stink eye, willya?” Jack said. “We’re all on the same team here, ain’t we? Look, I know there are times when I should be all ‘businesslike’ and whatever, but Light here’s my main bro, and bros don’t go around callin’ each other ‘sir’ or ‘master’ or whaddever. And if our situations were reversed, I wouldn’t want Light actin’ like he’s my busboy either. You guys should think about what your behavior is doin’ to the kid. You want Light to act like this high-and-mighty ruler so he ends up all lonely with no real friends?” Jack cracked the forefinger on his right hand with his thumb. “As his bro, I ain’t gonna stand for that drool.”

The aforementioned “bad habit” Jack had was that he considered himself a “bro” and tended to call everyone he liked his “bro” too. Even though Jack looked like your stereotypical tough guy, he went out of his way to look out for his “bros”—so much so, in fact, that Gold and the other guys (and some of the women too) looked up to Jack as kind of an older brother figure. Which was all well and good, but it was the way he bonded with me that was somewhat contentious with the others. Of course, Jack had taken a liking to me and called me his “main bro,” interacting with me on a first-name basis without feeling any need to act deferential. As a result, he often clashed with Iceheat and the others, who took their reverence for me to the extreme at times.

“Guys, I really don’t mind what Jack calls me, so you don’t have to look so angry at him,” I said. “And Jack, try not to provoke the others too much, okay?”

My admonishment of all parties seemed to succeed in its objective of lowering the hackles of Iceheat and the others. Jack just shrugged airily, but readily complied all the same. However, I could feel the general mood was still a little on the sour side, so I decided to change the topic of conversation.

“Iceheat, you usually only wear your maid outfit in the Abyss, but I see you have your gauntlets on now too,” I noted. “I can’t remember the last time I saw you wearing them.”

“I have spent much of my time in the Abyss learning the finer points of the maid’s code from Mei, so I myself feel a little strange being fully equipped on this mission,” said Iceheat. She was usually a

strict disciplinarian when talking to others, but chatting to me, her expression had softened and she smiled in a way that told me she was enjoying this little chitchat.

Iceheat did indeed work as one of my maids under the supervision of Mei, and she took her job very seriously, working extremely hard to perfect her craft. Whenever I teleported back to the Abyss, she would usually be the one to come and escort me around my stronghold as my bodyguard. Although Iceheat was originally intended to be a gauntlet-wearing warrior, I saw her more as a maid.

However, the most distinctive thing about her look was her bicolored hair, which she wore in two long bunches. The right half of her hair was flaming red and the left half was an iceberg blue. It wasn't just her hair that was distinctive though; she was around 170 centimeters tall, and she had large breasts, long legs, and an hourglass figure. Yet her body was also taut and well-toned, giving her the look of a top battler. Her large angular eyes sat either side of a nose with a straight bridge. Although it was true that Iceheat was certainly statuesque, "dashing" would be a better description for her than cute. For that reason, she probably had an easier time attracting women than men.

Mera broke into the conversation by cackling and poking fun at Iceheat. "If it feels that weird, what's preventing you from taking off your gauntlets right here and now? In fact, who says you have to stop at those gauntlets? Go nuts. Take off that maid outfit and really let your hair down!"

"I myself would never engage in such indecent and improper behavior in front of Master Light," Iceheat sniffed. "Mera, do I need to *personally* reeducate you on what is and isn't acceptable conduct after this mission?"

"Now you're talking!" Mera said, cackling again. "But if you want to hang out with me, all you had to do was ask!"

"We will *not* be hanging out!" Iceheat said firmly.

At first glance, you'd think there would be no way the super-serious Iceheat would *ever* get along with Mera and her flippant attitude to everything, but in reality, the two were actually pretty friendly toward each other. I'd even heard they usually ate meals together in the Abyss cafeteria. *Do opposites really attract?* I asked myself.

By contrast, I'd heard that Suzu—who was currently leading the way to the tower—usually ate alone. Or more accurately, she usually ate with just her talking musket, Lock, for company. At least, that was what we were supposed to call this strange weapon, which looked a bit like a hollowed-out lance to me. Suzu was a magical "gunner" who used this "musket" to fire shots at high speed, like some kind of

special bow and arrow. As a gunner, Suzu was also gifted with ranger-class skills, which is why she'd been picked to lead the way through the woods.

Suzu was quite short, but still slightly taller than me. She had lustrous black hair that was cut short, and perched on her head was a cute-looking hunting cap. She wore a green cloak over a snug-fitting corset dress, and she had a pouch slung around her hips. Her dress ended quite high up her leg, but she was also wearing black tights as well as knee-high boots. Suzu was so pretty, all the fairy maids agreed she ranked highly among her competition. Her lips were rosy pink, and on the rare occasion where it was possible to actually see them, her teeth were pearly white. Suzu's raven hair added to the mysterious aura she exuded.

Even though outwardly, Suzu looked like the most perfect cute girl you'd ever seen, she was neither male nor female. *Her card said she was "intersex," but what does that mean exactly?* I thought as my eyes briefly lingered on Suzu's back. *I tried asking her about it once, but all she did was stare down at her feet, like she was ashamed.*

I could still remember the exact words I'd said to her at the time. "Suzu, Lock, what does 'intersex' *actually* mean? If you're neither one nor the other, why do you wear women's clothes?"

Suzu had just stood there in awkward silence, prompting Lock to speak for her. "Um, Lord Light, I wouldn't pry too deep into that."

Suzu whispered something to the musket before it continued. "But regarding the clothing situation, she says she's willing to change into men's clothes if that is your order, Lord Light. But she wouldn't feel comfortable wearing men's clothes, so she wondered if it was possible to allow her to keep wearing what she has on now. Sorry, I know my partner's asking a lot."

"There's no need to apologize," I said to Lock. "I was only asking because I was curious. I should be the one apologizing for asking about something so personal."

I'd honestly just been curious, nothing more. I wasn't about to force her to change her outfit if she didn't want to.

"Thank you so much, Lord Light," Suzu said after a long pause. Suzu's voice was so soft, I could barely hear her, but she smiled while saying it, albeit shyly. Apart from Lock, I was the only person who'd ever heard Suzu speak. I was flattered she was so devoted to me, but I really wanted her to bond with the others too. But was I asking too much this time? I'd gotten Mei to urge the fairy maids to become friends with Suzu, but so far, there didn't seem to have been much progress on that front.

"Lord Light, we've made it to the Great Tower," Lock called back to me while I was busy reminiscing about the recent past. The tower

stood in the middle of a freshly made clearing that stretched for dozens and dozens of meters. The trees that had stood here had been chopped down and the ground had been leveled. It was as if a huge hole had been carved out of the wild, untamed forest. Then there was the marble-white tower itself with its circular tiers, the biggest at ground level and growing smaller the higher the tower ascended. *We'd draw in a lot of people if we turned this place into a tourist spot*, I thought. *We could even charge people money to go all the way up to the top floor.*

While I was absentmindedly musing on this, I gazed up at the huge tower and spotted Aoyuki dangling her slender legs over the side of the first tier. Ellie was beside her, restlessly pacing up and down, while Nazuna was on the ground next to the tower, swinging a fallen tree branch around like a sword, seemingly out of boredom. As soon as my three lieutenants noticed me and my party approaching, they dropped down from the ledge—or in Nazuna's case, tossed away her tree branch—and came running up to me with beaming smiles on their faces.

"Blessed Lord Light! I'm so glad you're here!" Ellie gushed.

"Master, what took ya?" Nazuna called out, waving her hand up and down wildly.

"Mrrow!" Aoyuki purred, rubbing up against me like a real cat.

After a few brief greetings, we decided to all head into the tower, where it was more secure, and while we were making our way inside, Ellie briefed me on the particulars of the ongoing operation.



Before my party had arrived, Aoyuki had been busy making sure wayward adventurers were kept well away from the tower, deploying and coordinating monsters she had tamed via direct mental links to them. We'd also taken a number of other magical measures to ensure that no outsiders could roam the immediate vicinity of the tower unchecked, but even so, we knew someone or something might be monitoring us with some as-yet-unknown power, which was why we hurried inside the tower as quickly as possible.

"The internal part of the tower was created by my magic, and I've also applied the power from the Abyss's dungeon core," Ellie explained. "That makes it both physically and magically impossible for anyone to observe us or listen in on us while we're in here, so you can relax and be at ease, Blessed Lord Light!"

If Ellie said the coast was clear, who was I to doubt her? I took off my SSR Fool's Mask and secreted it away in my Item Box. I didn't find the mask suffocating at all or hard to see through, but even so, I felt more comfortable without it on.

The first floor of the tower was lined with pillars that looked so massive, they could easily pass for thousand-year-old trees, and if I strained my eyes, I could see a Red Dragon about ten to fifteen meters in length curled up asleep all the way at the back of the huge room. It seemed as if entering its space uninvited had awoken the dragon, and the creature greeted us with a low but menacing growl.

“Hey, you!” Iceheat shouted over to it. “You might be a huge flying lizard, but that doesn’t give you the right to snarl at Master Light like that!”

The bloodlust emanating from Iceheat and the others crashed against the Red Dragon like a wave, and sensing it was in mortal danger, the poor creature rolled over onto its back and exposed its belly while literally whining like a dog. The dragon even gazed at us through teary eyes, and I couldn’t help finding the whole spectacle rather adorable.

I chuckled awkwardly and waved my hand to settle my troops down. “I really don’t mind, you guys. You don’t need to scare the poor thing.”

My intervention managed to dispel the aura of bloodlust around my party, and Ellie hung her head in apology. “Forgive me, Blessed Lord Light. I summoned one of my pets, but it has ended up being rude to you. I do require a Red Dragon for our plans, but I’ll make sure to thoroughly punish the beast later.”

So Ellie was the one who’d summoned it. No wonder I’d never seen this creature before. I flashed a smile at the Red Dragon before turning to Ellie and saying, “I’m fine with it, honest. If you really need to scold this guy, don’t go too overboard.”

The Red Dragon rolled over onto its front and bowed its head to me several times, still making whining noises. I found the whole display so delightful, I couldn’t help smiling from ear to ear. Though I did have to wonder *why* we needed a dragon of all things in the tower.

Still puzzling it over, I released my SSR Teleportation card to transport my team up to the fifth floor. Ellie had told me the tower was designed to be foolproof against teleportation magic, but since the jamming mechanism hadn’t been activated yet, I was able to use my Teleportation card just fine and we instantly arrived in a fairly nondescript room. Waiting for me in the center of it was a throne made out of the same material as the tower itself, but other than this regal-looking seat perched atop a dais and a red carpet leading up to it, there were no other furnishings in the room.

Ellie gestured for me to proceed, so I walked up to the throne and sat down. My three lieutenants dropped to one knee in front of me and lowered their heads—Aoyuki and Nazuna to my right, while Ellie was to my left. Kneeling directly behind them (going from right to

left) were Gold, Nemumu, Iceheat, Mera, Suzu, and Jack.

After an appropriate pause, I addressed my soldiers. “You may raise your heads.”

All of them did as they were ordered, and as I looked from face to face, I saw a variety of expressions, though each one conveyed absolute fealty to me. Once upon a time, I would’ve been totally weirded out by this display of veneration, but I was mostly used to it by this point, and I continued without missing a beat.

“Ellie, could you fill us in again on where we are at with the Sasha revenge plot, please?” I said.

“Why, gladly, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie said. She cleared her throat and launched into her grandiloquent lecture. “It was Blessed Lord Light who originally came up with this revenge plot that ensured Sasha got her just deserts. I simply added my own little flourishes to it.”

She was right on that. Just before I’d departed on Operation Adventurer, which had brought me up here to the surface world, I had summoned my inner circle to my office in the Abyss and laid out the basic outline of my revenge plot.

“Our agents on the surface have informed us that Sasha is about to marry the deputy knight commander, who is related to the royal family by blood,” I’d told them at the time. “She must be on cloud nine right now, and as a former fellow party member of hers, I want to ‘celebrate’ this happy occasion in the best way possible.”

I went on to outline the crux of my plan to my four lieutenants. “We’ll have Sasha and her fiancé face us together. Then we’ll give this fiancé of hers a choice: abandon Sasha or fight us.”

Sasha had tried to kill me, and years later, she was on the verge of marrying her fiancé and starting a new happy life with him. I was pretty sure Sasha and her husband-to-be shared a strong bond, so he wasn’t likely to abandon his fiancée even if pressured to do so, but I had been stabbed in the back and left for dead by my supposed allies in the Concord of the Tribes, and I was almost certain Sasha had never felt such a crushing sense of betrayal like that in her life. So I decided I would engineer this situation on the off chance that, if her fiancé *did* choose to abandon her to save his own skin, Sasha would experience the same sorrow I’d felt that day, even if it was only a small taste of it.

To sum up, I was planning to put Sasha in a similar situation to the one I had been placed in, and watch as she gets betrayed by someone she loves while on the brink of death.

Back in the present in the Great Tower, Ellie was going through all the modifications she had made to my original plan. “I thought Blessed Lord Light’s proposal was an absolutely marvelous one. However, I believed it also presented us with a great opportunity to

get more out of it than simply ridding ourselves of a traitor.”

Ellie continued with a satisfied look on her face. “That treacherous elf Sasha will certainly die; of that, there is no question. But if we’re going to kill her, then we should do it in the most effective way—one that will maximize what we get out of it. I didn’t want to let this opportunity go to waste.”

Ellie started giggling like an innocent little girl. It was the kind of display that was so charming, it would have made every single male on the surface world fall in love with her if they had witnessed it. Of course, her giggling was in complete contrast with how dark and calculating her plot was.

“First, we’ll get Blessed Lord Light to take back information on the ‘Great Mystery Tower,’ which will raise his reputation as an adventurer. In fact, this one achievement alone might be enough to get the Elven Queendom guild to raise his party’s rank. The next step in the plan gives us an opportunity to test out our strength. I know we are very powerful beings compared to the fighters up here on the surface world, but with this tower, we can draw in large numbers of enemies and see how we would actually fare in a fight against them.”

“As you will recall, Blessed Lord Light captured the elf known as Kyto in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon,” Ellie continued. “While scouring through his memories, I found out that the White Knights are likely to have information that could prove useful to us. Therefore, if we capture the White Knights, we should be able to extract more information about Masters from them. Their capture would also take the Elven Queendom’s strongest fighting force out of the equation, and this significant loss of military might would force the queendom to the negotiating table. At that point, we would be able to extract even more information about Masters from them.”

Ellie started winding up her briefing, still with a mischievous smile on her face. “In short, our plan will make the Elven Queendom completely subordinate to us. Now, the real question is: how will the other eight nations respond to this ground-shaking development? If those eight nations do decide to attack us, what military capabilities will they deploy? Will they use trump cards we don’t yet know about? Will they have people, soldiers, weapons, and magic items we won’t be able to repel, even with our combined might?”

“This tower will serve as a crucial test to find the answer to all of those questions,” Ellie said in closing. “Worst-case scenario, our enemies end up destroying this tower, but that would still leave our real headquarters in the Abyss unscathed. This place will serve us well as a base of operations that we can easily sacrifice if necessary. And that concludes this overview of our revenge plot.”

I could tell that everyone in the room was impressed by the sheer

breadth of Ellie's plot, even if they didn't say as such. I could tell Ellie could hear this silent applause too, as her beaming smile grew even brighter. As a key member of my brain trust in the Abyss, Ellie had indeed come up with an outstanding plan that would maximize the benefits we could reap from this situation. In any case, it wasn't as if she was telling us all something that was still on the drawing board; even as we stood here talking, her plan was proceeding swimmingly. That didn't stop me from wanting to ask Ellie some questions about it, however.

"That was stellar, Ellie," I said. "But could you clear up a few things that are concerning me?"

"Of course, Blessed Lord Light," said Ellie. "I will answer any question you see fit to ask."

"I don't see any problems with the actual plan you have come up with, but are you *totally* sure Sasha, her fiancé, and the rest of the White Knights will show up at this tower?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, they definitely will," Ellie replied. "In fact, things have already been set in motion."

I was confident that Ellie would come through for me, but her plan wouldn't count for anything if Sasha and the White Knights failed to take the bait, so I needed to make sure our enemies really would act the way we anticipated. But the superwitch simply smiled at me and proceeded to put my mind to rest.

"When you leave here, you'll head to the Adventurers' Guild and hand in a report giving details about the mystery tower. However, we'll also *let* Sasha submit a similar report to the guild—with the help of Aoyuki and her monster-taming powers, of course."

"Mreoww!" Aoyuki mewed in assent.

"The queendom will receive this totally new information on the tower from two separate sources: one report submitted by a human adventuring party, and one by an elf adventurer. If both reports basically match each other, the queendom authorities will be more likely to believe the info, never even realizing that they're dancing to our tune."

It sounded like there was a lot more to me taking back intel on the tower than just scoring some kudos for my party.

"We'll make it so that both your party and Sasha's relate to the guild that a Red Dragon is living inside this tower," Ellie continued. "Even though the tower is quite a distance from the queendom's capital, a dragon poses an immediate threat to them if you take into account how fast they can travel. Unless they have an extremely incompetent person in charge, no leader of a nation would ignore a dragon on their doorstep. And if that is coupled with the possibility that there is potentially someone *controlling* that dragon, and that

other powerful monsters might be lurking inside the tower, the queendom would have no choice but to send the White Knights here.”

It was just like having a large, dangerous monster living next door to you. Your only choices were to either move somewhere else, or if you were an adventurer, to eliminate—or at the very least, drive out—the monster. Since it wasn’t really possible for the queendom to just up and move, that meant they’d either have to kill the Red Dragon or chase it out of their nation. And the odds of the queendom sending the White Knights to carry out such a task were nine to one. Even this second son of a peasant farmer knew there wasn’t a fool alive who would decide against deploying their strongest fighters to deal with such a problem.

So she summoned a dragon for the sole purpose of Sasha seeing it? I mused. I thought back to the Red Dragon on the ground floor of the tower—the same dragon that had rolled over and played dead simply because my troops had given it a dirty look. Ever since that moment, I’d been wondering what reason Ellie had for summoning that dragon, but I finally understood. She definitely wasn’t lonely for a pet, that’s for sure.

“Thanks to you, Blessed Lord Light, we were able to tell Sasha in writing that you’d be waiting for her at the Great Tower,” Ellie said. “So not only will that vile woman want to be recognized for getting the intel on this tower, she’ll also want to personally make sure you’re dead in order to secure her peace and happiness. And to do that, she will join the White Knights and...”

She stopped abruptly at this point because she couldn’t help her teeth grinding while talking about Sasha. And she wasn’t alone in having that reaction: the fifth-floor throne room filled with the sound of back teeth grinding in anger because everyone else was doing likewise.

“Sasha’s fiancé is called Mikhael and he is the vice-commander of the White Knights. According to the memories I extracted from Kyto, Mikhael is very ambitious and sees the White Knights’ commander as a rival. He’s rumored to be colluding with the Elven Queendom’s chancellor, who is apparently working behind the scenes to get rid of the commander due to him being the principal figure in the traditionalist faction. I don’t see how those petty opportunists can possibly stand by and *not* try to use this new info about the Red Dragon to their advantage.”

Ellie predicted Mikhael and Sasha would attempt to resolve this tower crisis together in order to attain the level of prestige they would need to put their future daughter firmly in the running to become the next queen. The chancellor would also no doubt provide an extra little push in that direction, ensuring that both Sasha and Mikhael would

enter the tower on a seek and destroy mission.

“And that’s why I believe the entirety of the White Knights order will participate in this mission to the tower,” Ellie summed up. “But I guarantee our guests will be thoroughly entertained by the strongest fighters we have to offer, as you can see.”

Beaming triumphantly, Ellie placed her right hand on her body and extended her left hand toward my troops.

And what a welcoming party it was that awaited them. Aside from the Forbidden Witch herself, there were my two other SUR Level 9999 lieutenants: the Genius Monster Tamer, Aoyuki, and the Ancestral Vampire Knight, Nazuna. They were familiar enough faces by this point, as were Gold and Nemumu, though these two would be taking no part in the tower battles. That just left the four other warriors who had been assigned to fight the White Knights. First up was UR Level 7777, Double Gunner, Suzu. But instead of responding to me, the still-kneeling Suzu whispered something to Lock and got her musket to speak for her.

“My partner says she’ll do whatever it takes to make you proud, Lord Light,” Lock reported.

Next up was UR Level 7777, Chimera, Mera, who erupted into her trademark cackle. “You say these White Knights are supposed to be the strongest fighters the Elven Queendom’s got?” Mera laughed. “Hope they make it worth my while.”

Still kneeling, UR Level 7777, Ironblooded Barricade, Jack enthusiastically raised his voice. “*Hell* yeah! I don’t care if they’re elves, knights, or whaddever! Any chud who comes at my main bro is gonna get their ass stomped!”

And last but not least, UR Level 7777, Frozen Firestorm Grappler, Iceheat, whose expression was deadly serious as she spoke: “I, Iceheat, will gladly lay down my life as well as fight with all my might for my Master Light!”

I’d assigned Mei the task of governing the Abyss in my absence, and I didn’t count the God Wolf Fenrir and any of the other monsters at my disposal in this list of top fighters since they were under Aoyuki’s control, so Ellie was right when she’d said the people assembled here in this room—me included—were the strongest fighters the Abyss had to offer to fight the elite White Knights.

Like Ellie says, the elves won’t have any time whatsoever to get bored in this little tussle, I thought to myself, smiling smugly.

“Great work, Ellie,” I said out loud. “We should be able to give Sasha and her chums the fight of their lives.”

“I’m so glad you’re happy with my efforts, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie gushed, a genuine smile lighting up her face.

Now that all of my concerns had been alleviated, I was free to

focus all of my energy on the thrill of getting my revenge on Sasha.

Chapter 8: Sasha's Recon Mission

“Ugh, that woman pisses me off so *much!*” Sasha ranted as she pressed forward into the wild forest. “Acting all snooty just because she thinks she’s so pretty. And that little inferior brat was every bit as disgusting as Light was. I wish every damn inferior would just go drop dead!”

Thanks to her Level 500 abilities, Sasha was making faster progress through the forest than even she would’ve anticipated based on her past experiences as part of the Concord of the Tribes, with the two elf escorts she had brought with her following at a distance. Sasha had previously done some questing in this forest back when she was a rookie adventurer, not long after she’d been driven out of her father’s estate, and even though she hadn’t been back to these haunts in a very long time, she’d cleared the outer edges of the forest with ease and was making good progress toward the tower.

A sudden shock made Sasha stop in her tracks. She silently signaled to her two escorts to stand completely still and not make a sound. Sasha had sighted a monster scratching itself against the trunk of a tree nearby. The creature was a good ten meters long, walked on four legs, and had a snake for a tail that was thicker than Sasha’s torso. That same snake-tail slithered about in midair, stretching and compressing itself, and flicking its bloodred tongue in and out, seemingly out of boredom. What Sasha didn’t know was that this beast was a Snake Hellhound, a Level 1000 monster, but even so, the thing looked terrifying enough to give Sasha goosebumps.

Wh-What even is that thing? A monster out of a ghost story? Sasha thought. *Is this supposed to be that giant snake-tailed quadruped that’s reportedly been attacking adventurers who get anywhere near the tower?*

Sasha continued her mental griping as she carefully observed the creature’s every movement. *The monsters that live deep in these woods are supposed to be between Levels 150 to 200, but that thing looks way more powerful than that! No Level 100 or even Level 200 adventurer could ever hope to take on a behemoth like that! Do I really have to fight my way to the tower with this thing prowling around? Am I being punished? What did I ever do to deserve this?!*

If the creature spotted Sasha, she’d be a goner in an instant, and the stress of that grisly thought gave Sasha sharp stabbing pains in her stomach. After a while, the Snake Hellhound trotted off into the forest,

leaving the elves alone again. Sasha breathed a huge sigh of relief—or rather, it was like she was exhaling for the first time since laying eyes on that monster. The blond and silver-haired escorts had followed Sasha's lead and kept their breathing and movements to a minimum after quickly realizing that their employer had spotted a very deadly monster.

I-I can't just keep forging ahead through the forest now! Not with that absolute freak lurking around in here! thought Sasha. *But if I don't reach the tower, my life will be ruined...*

"Um, Miss Sasha, are you okay?"

One of the escorts had approached Sasha to check on her, but her nerves were so frazzled, she was unable to answer him immediately. She had, however, hit upon a realization. *That was a ridiculously high-level monster, but it had no idea we were standing so close by, so its detection abilities must be fairly weak. And that thing was rubbing itself against a tree... Marking its territory, perhaps? The scratches those monsters leave on the tree trunks will give us some clues on where exactly they're prowling around and if one of them is nearby. That should give me a chance to avoid those nightmarish creatures completely and get nearer to the tower...*

"Miss Sasha?" one of her worried-looking escorts called out to her again, but all he got in response was an ice-cold look from Sasha.

And if I do run into that thing again, I always have a couple of decoys I can throw its way... The escorts Sasha had brought with her were totally her type in the looks department, but when it came down to her own survival and a life with Mikhael, they were entirely disposable.

"Sorry, I'm fine," Sasha said finally. "Come on, let's move."

The Snake Hellhound had scared the living daylight out of Sasha, but now that she knew she had the ability to avoid the creature, Sasha decided to press forward with her recon mission to safeguard her marriage. Of course, what Sasha *didn't* know was that the Snake Hellhound had absolutely been aware that Sasha's party was nearby. In fact, covert monsters that Aoyuki had tamed were constantly monitoring Sasha's movements through the forest. Aoyuki had ordered this particular Snake Hellhound to pretend to ignore Sasha and rub itself against a tree trunk, even though it had no need to. This action was a calculated one to fool Sasha into thinking the creature was marking its territory.

Aoyuki's goal had simply been to frighten Sasha, though not *too* much, because she couldn't risk the elf giving up on her recon mission altogether. Aoyuki was planning to make Sasha's quest as stressful as she could possibly get away with. After all, this was the wretched woman who'd made her master's life a misery—the same master

Aoyuki had dedicated her mind, body, and soul, and every single drop of her blood to. But ignorant of this malicious ruse against her, Sasha once again took the lead in the elf party's foray through the woods, a needlessly determined look etched across her face.

A few days later, Sasha reached the large clearing that encircled the white layered edifice. From her vantage point, she had a clear view of the one and only opening that led inside its bottom tier.

"That must be the entrance to the tower," Sasha concluded.

The clearing had a radius of about fifty meters with the tower smack in the center, and it was completely devoid of trees. Sasha was still hiding in the undergrowth about fifteen meters farther back from the edge of the clearing, her face haggard with fatigue. She'd made herself some makeshift camouflage out of leaves and branches as well as deliberately smeared mud on her face, and from her concealed spot among the trees, she surveyed the looming tower. She hadn't brought her escorts-slash-emergency decoys with her to the clearing as she reckoned they would only be a hindrance, instead making the two male elves hide and wait some distance away. She would rendezvous with them once she was done surveilling the tower.

It had taken her an inordinate amount of time to get to this place, and the trip had frayed her nerves as well as her stomach lining, largely due to the amount of times the monsters lurking in the forest—the Snake Hellhounds—had suddenly just plodded right across her path in front of her eyes without any warning. The creatures had a tendency to noisily make their presence known only about a meter or so away from her, and the only way Sasha could keep from screaming in surprise when that happened was by clapping both hands over her mouth. This scene had repeated itself every so often, even though Sasha had purposely tried to avoid the marked territories as she threaded her way through the forest. Sasha had put all of those close shaves down to simple bad luck, but in reality, those incidents were yet more calculated harassment, courtesy of Aoyuki.

Without once suspecting that she was being toyed with, Sasha had continued her trek toward the mystery tower, making sure to slalom her way around the fictitious boundaries that marked the Snake Hellhounds' supposed territories. She drafted detailed maps of what were seemingly safe routes, and made notes on the monsters she saw, including their classification and where they could be found lurking. But finally, after all of that endeavor, she was close enough to the tower to observe all the comings and goings with a strong degree of confidence that she'd be able to see everything that was going there.

After a few hours of watching the tower entrance like a hawk, Sasha finally spotted some movement. *Ah, so those monsters really do live in that tower*, she thought to herself.

She saw a number of Snake Hellhounds coming out of the entrance and bounding away into the forest. But then she spied something that shocked her completely. *Are you kidding me?* she gasped internally. *Is that a d-dragon? Is that seriously a dragon coming out of that tower?*

The sun's rays reflected brilliantly off the crimson scales of the Red Dragon that had just emerged from the tower. The dragon arched its back and stretched, and as its neck and forearms extended, it spread its giant wings. The Red Dragon was over fifteen meters long, and even from a distance, Sasha could tell it was a high-level monster. The dragon gave its body a shake and yawned wide, revealing teeth so razor sharp they looked like they could pierce anything. Folding up its wings again, the dragon went back inside the tower, leaving Sasha totally stunned and drenched in cold sweat. *Those dangerous quadrupeds are one thing, but how the hell is there a dragon living in that tower?! Wouldn't it fight with those four-legged beasts? Is this tower a dungeon that's spawned this dragon and all those monsters?*

Monsters spawned in the same dungeon didn't fight each other—or for that matter, didn't even need to eat. One theory was that monsters got mana from the dungeons they resided in, negating their necessity for consumption of food, which made some sort of sense because it was logical that the dungeons themselves wouldn't want the monsters they'd created to go around destroying each other.

This dragon's just a short hop and a skip away from the capital. If it ever decided to fly to the city, it could wreak untold damage... Just imagining the carnage made Sasha's head hurt. Does this mean that inferior, Light, is waiting for me in this hellhole that's teeming with monsters? Could this be a trap?

Perhaps it was a woman or some other group jealous of Sasha's betrothal to Mikhael who were responsible for setting up this trap? But Sasha quickly waved away this notion. The tower had only appeared *after* she'd seen that missive on the wall which had been specifically addressed to her from Light, and there was no way anyone else could have known about this tower in advance and posted that message.

Whatever the case, a dragon like that can't be left to its own devices. Its very presence threatens the capital of the queendom. I need to hurry back and hand in my report as soon as I can.

Sasha had intended to explore the inside of the tower if she'd seen her opportunity, but this new information had meant that was out of the question. Right now, her main priority was to report the presence of this dragon to the queendom's authorities as quickly as possible, before the dragon got it into its head to attack the capital. Sasha slowly retreated into the shadows and departed from her concealed

position on the edge of the clearing, taking extra special care to match the sound of her movements to the sound of the wind. Though, of course, Aoyuki's monsters continued to observe Sasha's every move without the elf even having an inkling she was being watched.



In response to this disturbing new information about the Great Mystery Tower, an emergency meeting was called in the council chambers of the Elven Queendom palace.

"You're telling me there's a Red Dragon in that tower?!" Queen Lif VII practically screamed on hearing the report. There were loud murmurs from the rest of the people in the chamber at this news.

The chancellor—who was once again sitting to the left of the queen at the conference table—did his best to feign concern, but his barely concealed joy was obvious to anyone looking at him. On the queen's right, Hardy sat in silence with his eyes closed. The other officials and head knights present in the room talked about the Red Dragon with the people sitting next to them. When the murmurings had subsided a little, the chancellor aired his opinions on the matter.

"To think that a dragon of all things would be residing in that tower..." he said. "The tower *is* a considerable way from our great capital by foot, but a dragon capable of flight would be able to cover that distance in a flash! It's only a matter of time until this creature swoops down and incinerates this city we call home, or maybe even destroys the highway to the south!"

"That eventuality is highly possible," Queen Lif replied. Hardy maintained his silence.

The chancellor had adopted a look approximating patriotic concern at the impending crisis facing the queendom, but the vibes he was giving off betrayed his joy at being presented with this chance to strike a blow against his foe, Hardy. Though at the same time, he had truth on his side; the Elven Queendom's capital really was just a stone's throw away for a dragon living in the middle of the forest to the west. It was like discovering a bomb in your backyard—anyone would try to get rid of such a dangerous threat as soon as possible. In other words, the queendom had no choice but to deploy the White Knights—its strongest fighting force—and send them into a forest teeming with deadly monsters in order to get rid of this dragon.

Hardy the Silent hadn't said a word up to this point, but he chose this moment to finally speak. "Chancellor, how reliable is this information?"

The chancellor responded by theatrically flipping through the document in his hand. "The intelligence comes from two sources," the chancellor said. "It was first reported by human questers who

informed the city's Adventurers' Guild of what they had learned about the tower. I believe their party is called the 'Black Fools'—the one that's recently been making a name for itself in that dwarf dungeon. It seems this party is also the one that discovered and reported to the Dwarf Kingdom's guild that it was an elf in cahoots with a dark elf who was murdering all those adventurers—the same elf, I note, who double-crossed a *certain* order of knights. As far as human adventurers go, they appear to be outstanding individuals of unimpeachable credibility.”

That elf was of course Kyto, the disgraced former member of the White Knights. The chancellor had inserted that extra unnecessary bit of information as a bit of political point-scoring at Queen Lif and Hardy's expense. The queen was annoyed on her son's behalf, but masked her expression with her folding fan. As ever, Hardy maintained his unflappable demeanor. The chancellor continued his summary in a tone that was far more upbeat than was appropriate for the topic at hand.

“We received another report a few days later, and this one came from none other than Miss Sasha, who is betrothed to Sir Mikhael, the vice-commander of the White Knights,” the chancellor stated. “Out of a solemn sense of duty to our great nation, she journeyed to the Great Mystery Tower to investigate it herself. She even hired two elf adventurers out of her own money to assist her in this unimaginably dangerous quest. In all honesty, Sir Mikhael has found himself a fine young woman to marry. Who else would part with good money to risk their own life for the good of their nation? And what's more, she brought back valuable information about the Red Dragon! I would like to take this opportunity to say that Miss Sasha is the very model of an elf woman and the ideal that all should attempt to emulate!”

This was high praise indeed, though it was colored by the fact that the chancellor was colluding with Mikhael to take down a common enemy: Mikhael needed to remove someone who was blocking his career path, while the chancellor needed Hardy out of the way so he could establish a patriarchal society. Even with the threat of a Red Dragon nearby, the two continued to engage in their factional maneuverings to trip up the White Knights' commander, who on paper was their ally. Of course, both Hardy and Queen Lif knew full well the chancellor and Mikhael were conspiring against them, but decorum dictated that you didn't publicly call out your political opponents at a time like this.

Hardy ignored the plaudits the chancellor was showering on Mikhael as he scoured the written reports on the Red Dragon. “So you say this intelligence is solid because two reports came in from elf and inferior adventurers that corroborated each other, is that right?” If just

one party of adventurers—elf or human—had handed in this information, Hardy would have been quite within his rights to ask for some additional intel before acting on it, but with two matching reports like this from two separate parties, it was all but certain that there was a Red Dragon residing in that tower.

On top of that, the reports included details on the snake-tailed quadrupeds that had been seen going in and out of the tower. The descriptions included the monsters' characteristics, their body lengths, their territorial range, and noted that their power levels were definitely over 500, and presumed to even surpass the 1000 mark. The guild had attached their own interpretation of this information: *The Great Mystery Tower is likely a new high-level dungeon, since it has two types of monsters living inside it.*

The reports also included information on the monsters that had been forced out of the deepest parts of the forest to the west, including their presumed power levels, their characteristics, their body lengths, and even a map detailing where those creatures tended to gather. During the previous council meeting, Hardy had snidely shot down the chancellor's appeals to mobilize the White Knights to the mystery tower by citing a lack of intelligence. At the time, the chancellor had no rebuttal to this and could only grind his teeth at his pride being wounded in such a manner. But this time around, the situation was very different, and the chancellor was able to get his revenge on Hardy—and in a public space, no less.

Unable to contain his joy, the chancellor grinned at the White Knights' commander, who was sitting across the table from him. "With this much intelligence at your disposal, you and that 'powerful blade' of yours should know *exactly* where to strike," the chancellor stated, laying it on thick. "I do hope there is no need to assume otherwise."

On this occasion, it was Hardy who was unable to mount any kind of counterargument, causing Queen Lif to wince sharply behind her folding fan. Hardy finally assented to launching an operation to the Great Mystery Tower, though his expression was unusually strained as he announced it.

"There is no other option," Hardy declared plainly. "My White Knights will engage this Red Dragon and ensure we remove it from this land!"

Chapter 9: Strategy Meeting

Immediately after the council meeting at the Elven Queendom's palace, the White Knights came together and held their own strategy meeting. The rest of the White Knights had been on standby at the order's private billet, which was where the gathering was taking place. In attendance were: Hardy, the commander; Mikhael, the vice-commander; Sharphat, the marksman; and the three raiders, Nhia, Khia, and Muste. Due to the White Knights using a round table for all their meetings, there was no assigned seating based on seniority, and everyone was free to pick where they sat.

After confirming that everyone was present, Hardy started the meeting in a solemn tone. "As you all know, the Great Mystery Tower appeared out of nowhere in the wild forest near the capital. Adventurers have subsequently determined that there is a Red Dragon residing in that tower. As such, the White Knights have been assigned the task of slaying this dragon."

"Whoa, chief, slow down. Are we positive about this so-called Red Dragon?" Sharphat chimed in. "I mean, these are adventurers we're talking about. Are we supposed to just *trust* what they supposedly saw and heard?"

"The intel is as solid as it gets," Hardy replied dispassionately. "We received a report from a party of inferiors, and another very similar report from a party led by the vice-commander's fiancée."

The other four White Knights turned to Mikhael, who took the attention in his stride, grinning suavely. "I do not deserve a wife as amazing as Miss Sasha," he said.

Mikhael's strangely composed response prompted Nhia and Khia to communicate with each other with their eyes, almost telepathically.

Nhia, what do you make of it? Khia blinked.

The vice-commander's definitely on maneuvers behind the scenes, Khia, Nhia responded. *These grown adults scare me sometimes.*

Sharphat didn't utter a word either, but his cool gaze said everything: *You know what'd be awesome? If we left these power struggles at the door. Just saying.*

Hardy ignored the now-weirdly tense mood around the table and started to prosaically hash out the particulars of this mission. The Red Dragon's power level was somewhere between 1000 and 2000. The other knights were to remain in the capital as backup as they would

only be a hindrance to the White Knights if they tagged along too.

Hardy betrayed a tinge of frustration as he relayed the final part of his opening statement. “The chancellor has also insisted that we take the vice-commander’s fiancée with us, as a scout to guide us to the tower.”

“Yo, chief, what’s up? *Actual* scout for the team here,” Sharphat said glibly. “So what am I hearing exactly? Am I not good enough anymore?” He was visibly grimacing as he said this, which was a complete departure from his usual laid-back attitude.



Before Hardy could answer, Mikhael raised his hands to draw the other knights' attention to himself. "Sharphat, I assure you that nobody doubts your skills as a scout. This is simply an idea that was suggested by my fiancée, since she has already made it to the tower and back and knows the exact routes that will allow us to avoid the territories that have been claimed by those strange monsters."

"I for one trust your fiancée," Muste said to Mikhael. "From what I've heard, she hired a team of adventurers with her own money in order to investigate the tower herself. I wish I had a fiancée who loved our queendom as much as yours obviously does, sir."

Even though what Muste said came across as unadulterated flattery, he truly meant every word he said. Sharphat clicked his tongue and reflexively scoffed at the younger knight. "Put another tick in the 'Team Chancellor' column."

"Hm? Well, yes, the chancellor may indeed bestow his patronage on my family, but that doesn't automatically mean I'm on his side, sir," Muste said. "In fact, I'm against the chancellor and the vice-commander's plans to bring an end to the queendom's matriarchy, for once you destroy a long-held tradition, it is very hard to restore it again. Oh, but just to be clear, I am not completely on the side of the queen either. I am constantly irritated by the timid stance she takes in regard to the humans."

"Dude! Seriously, what the hell?" Sharphat said with some alarm.

Nhia and Khia looked at Muste wide-eyed, as if he'd just sprouted another head. Mikhael pressed his fingers to his temple and sighed as though he was nursing a migraine. Hardy remained calm and taciturn in his chair, his eyes shut. When it came to the court factionalism between the chancellor and the queen, a snide comment here and there—like the one Sharphat had made—was not exactly a rare occurrence among the White Knights, but a full-on discussion of the subject like Muste had just blundered into was practically taboo.

The reason for this unspoken ban on the topic was simple: if people in authority were to openly opine on which side of the dispute they were on, it would quickly trigger endless quarreling that would grind the governance of the nation to a halt. Even the free spirits of the White Knights, Sharphat, Nhia, and Khia, knew where to draw the line when it came to making political comments. But due to his overly self-righteous attitude, Muste—the newest member of the order—felt free to speak his mind on practically all matters. It might be argued that Muste was still young and unfamiliar with all the political ties at play, but it would be more accurate to say that Muste simply didn't care about avoiding all of these politically sensitive landmines because he himself had no political influence to lose.

At least this kid's gifted with raw talent and has the potential for greatness, Mikhael thought, still rubbing his temple. But let's hope whoever eventually ends up marrying Muste keeps him on a very short leash.

Even though there was a possibility that Muste might surpass Mikhael in terms of their power levels, Mikhael didn't view Muste as a rival to be wary of due to this perceived flaw in his personality. In fact, Mikhael thought of Muste as more of a pawn, and if he really wanted to, he felt he could win over his younger counterpart with his silver tongue and use him to his advantage. The only question was how much effort that level of smooth-talking would require.

In an attempt to move on and dispel some of the awkwardness in the air, Mikhael cleared his throat and continued where he'd left off: talking about Sasha. "In any case, Miss Sasha is at Level 500, so she is perfectly capable of protecting herself. Furthermore, she used the count's connections to submit a formal request to join us on our mission. She wishes to see us reach the tower without unnecessarily exhausting ourselves on the way. Sharphat, I need you to understand that we are not denigrating your skills at all by doing this."

Mikhael, the count, the chancellor, and Sasha all had their own agendas when it came to Sasha's participation in this tower mission, but at the end of the day, none of that really mattered as Hardy had already accepted the directive from the chancellor to include Sasha. So no matter how much Sharphat complained about it, there was no chance of the decision being overturned, and he had no choice but to begrudgingly accept it. If Sharphat were to try to press his case, he'd be thought of as an unsophisticated halfwit who, like Muste, didn't know how to tiptoe through the minefield that is court politics, and that would be worse than being partially sidelined as the team's scout. But Sharphat wasn't going to back down without at least firing one last parting shot.

"All right, if the top dogs say I gotta kneel, I'll kneel," he said. "But are we seriously going to take along this chick who has a power level that's lower than some of the knights we're putting on standby? Sure, *maybe* she can look after herself, I dunno. Just don't blame me if she suddenly decides it's all too much for her and we end up having to waste our time dealing with her cockups."

"I assure you, everything will be fine," said Mikhael. "If she gets into trouble, I will take responsibility for her as her fiancé and protect her myself. Or would you rather we recruited the inferior party to act as our guides instead?"

All Sharphat could do was grimace at Mikhael's comeback. Yes, the recruitment of Sasha was obviously a power play fueled by factionalism, and she was elbowing in on his job as the team's scout,

but Sharphat would have a hell of a lot more trust in an elf adventurer leading the way than some scuzzy inferior.

The elf twins blurted out their total disgust at Mikhael's proposition. "That'd be unthinkable, right, Nhia?"

"Yeah, Khia. I'd rather have no scout at all than have to put up with an inferior tagging along with us."

"I agree," Muste added. And so, with a vote of five for and one against, the White Knights officially deputized Sasha as a scout.

Sharphat breathed out slowly as he recalibrated himself after this defeat. "Groovy. Guess that's settled then. Anyhoo, if we're gonna go slay this Red Dragon, doesn't that mean we'll have to deal with those snake-tailed freak shows too?"

"That is always a possibility," Hardy replied flatly. "But there is a plan in place to send in a team of decoys to distract those monsters while we concentrate on our main mission."

According to the reports that had been turned in by Sasha and the human adventurers, there were five or six snake-tailed monsters prowling around near the Great Mystery Tower, and the plan was to have a group of adventurers create a distraction in the area of the forest that had the highest frequency of sightings. That operation would be led by the party of human adventurers that had brought back the intel on the tower. Then, with the monsters preoccupied with these decoys, the White Knights would sneak into the tower and finish off the Red Dragon.

"So it's your classic diversion and strike op, yeah?" Sharphat summed up.

"It may be somewhat pedestrian, but it is highly effective as a tactic. And besides..." Hardy threw in a dramatic pause here to grab everyone's attention, and as his men waited in puzzled anticipation for what he was going to say next, Hardy's usually placid features suddenly morphed into an evil grin. "Inferiors make the perfect decoys. No matter how many of them you kill, their kind practically grows on trees."

A hush descended on the room, and Mikhael stared bug-eyed through his glasses at Hardy. Sharphat eventually broke the silence by full-on guffawing.

"You seriously need to workshop your jokes, chief," Sharphat said between chuckles. "You mean 'they grow like weeds,' obviously!"

"I didn't think you were capable of cracking a joke, Commander Hardy," said Muste. "But I'm afraid I don't find that one very funny."

"Don't you? I thought it was quite amusing myself," Mikhael said diplomatically. The twins, on the other hand, didn't even bother to try to gloss over Muste's latest faux pas.

"Nhia, Muste is being a thoughtless douche again."

“It takes real talent to be that dumb, Khia.”

As the others chatted away, Hardy quietly sipped his tea, paying no heed to the near-universal criticism he had received for his quip. The introduction of court factionalism into the conversation had soured the atmosphere in the room, so to lighten the mood, Hardy had gone as far as making a wisecrack of a kind he would never otherwise utter. He had decided it was necessary because he couldn't risk bad blood interfering with this important mission. Unfortunately, all he could muster up was the kind of malicious insult an elf aristocrat might come out with.

Almost as if he were sulking, a gruff expression appeared on Hardy's face once more and he continued with the briefing. “Save the flattery for later. We need to discuss the specifics of our operation.”

And so, the elves diligently worked on their plan, totally ignorant of what was really awaiting them in the tower.



“Miss Sasha, they are letting you join us on our mission.”

“You mean it? That's wonderful!”

Immediately after the White Knights' strategy meeting had concluded, Mikhael and Sasha had met up at an upscale restaurant. In addition to the fine dining on offer, the private rooms available at this establishment were a major draw. The two spouses-to-be were sitting opposite each other, waiting for their meals, when Mikhael had decided to drop this information on Sasha, who did a mental fist pump at the news. *This is my ticket to infiltrating that tower! And this time, I'll make sure Light stays dead!*

“The chancellor is also supporting us in our efforts,” Mikhael said. “And to prove it, he has loaned a phantasma-class weapon to us that has been passed down in his family for generations. And I trust the count has helped you out as well?”

“Erm, uh, yes!” Sasha blurted out, having been abruptly jerked out of her triumphant reverie. “Dearest father has also provided me with a phantasma-class weapon that has been passed down in his family for generations. So now both you and I will be safe from whatever awaits us.”

“I couldn't ask for more.”

Of course, the two families weren't just handing out such powerful ancient weapons out of the goodness of their hearts. No, they were looking out for their own interests. Even if a group of human adventurers had beaten Sasha to the punch, she had come back with valuable intelligence on the tower that concerned the queendom's national security. That alone was a significant coup on her part, and if the power couple also ended up doing their bit to save the nation from

impending doom, Mikhael would unquestionably gain the kind of leverage he was after.

Both the chancellor and the count were part of the faction that desired to end the matriarchy and replace it with a fully male-dominated society. With the backing of this faction, if Sasha and Mikhael were to give birth to a girl, their daughter would be the leading candidate to assume the throne after the current incumbent. If all went well, their daughter would become queen and aid the soft transition from matriarchy to this new male-oriented system of governance. For this future to have any sort of chance to come to pass, Sasha and Mikhael needed to succeed in this tower mission, and crucially, come back alive. So both the chancellor and the count had given the two of them phantasma-class weapons to guarantee that they would be successful in this endeavor. It was obvious how invested these two families were in this tower mission. And from Sasha's perspective, all she needed to do was kill Light and preserve her newfound life and status. Mikhael, on the other hand, needed a public relations victory over the great Hardy the Silent. By happenstance, the separate agendas of all four parties had neatly converged.

The queendom is sending the White Knights to the tower, and the two of us will be armed with phantasma-class heirlooms given to us by the count and the chancellor. The deployment of a fighting force capable of conquering an entire country makes failure unthinkable, Mikhael thought. The vice-commander instinctively stroked his chest pocket. *But even so, if worst comes to worst, I have my little piece of insurance that I never go anywhere without.*

Although Mikhael was only on the periphery of the royal family, the blood of queens still coursed through his veins. Given his status, it went without saying that he was already in receipt of a valuable family heirloom that had been passed down through the generations. Sasha eyed Mikhael curiously as he stroked his chest in a way that didn't make much sense to her, though before she could say anything about it, Mikhael put on a reassuring smile and raised his wine glass.

"Miss Sasha, shall we once more toast the radiant future that awaits us?"

"Of course, my love," Sasha replied, her attention—thankfully, for him—shifting to her own glass. The pair were the very picture of a harmonious couple as their glasses filled with bloodred wine came together to complete the toast.

"To our brightest future," Mikhael declared.

"To our brightest future," Sasha repeated as the two wine glasses clinked together. The elves then sipped their wine, their minds firmly on the rosy days that awaited them.

“The Elven Queendom’s guild has recruited me for their tower mission,” I told my fighters, who I’d assembled in the fifth-floor throne room of said tower. “The elves have adopted the exact strategy you predicted they would, Ellie. Since it was my party, the Black Fools, who brought them information on the tower, we’ve been chosen to act as decoys while the White Knights launch a sneak attack on this place.”

“I’m glad everything is progressing according to plan, but I really wish those elves weren’t so annoyingly predictable,” muttered Ellie, who was standing in front of my throne where I was seated. “I came up with all sorts of contingency plans to deal with any wrinkles that might present themselves. It’d be such a shame if all that time and effort just went to waste.”

Ellie giggled icily, and an equally cold grin spread across my face. I turned my attention to the rest of my elite fighters from the Abyss. “We’re finally about to raise the curtain on this play where I get my revenge on Sasha. I wonder how she’ll dance for us once we get her up onto the stage.”

My cruel grin widened yet further as I visualized Sasha’s final moments, beaten and broken at my feet. Still with this smirk firmly affixed to my face, I started issuing instructions to my troops in the order they were standing.

“Ellie, you will direct the overall operation,” I said. “I’m counting on you to make sure Sasha doesn’t escape. Nor any of her crew, for that matter.”

“I promise I won’t betray the confidence you have placed in me, Blessed Lord Light,” declared a smiling Ellie.

“Aoyuki, use your monsters to make sure no one interrupts our tower battles against Sasha and the White Knights,” I instructed the Genius Tamer. “Gold and Nemumu will be plenty busy being decoys while the White Knights’ mission is ongoing, so give them a fight that will boost their fame and reputation. But remember, my body double is also joining their team, so don’t play too rough with them.”

“Your word is my command, Master,” Aoyuki said coolly, the rim of her hood covering her eyes as per usual.

“Nazuna, I’m assigning you to fight the White Knights’ commander,” I said. “He’s supposedly the most powerful fighter at the Elven Queendom’s disposal, but he’ll probably be no match for the strongest fighter in the Abyss. However, this will be your chance to gauge how powerful you really are compared to the warriors on the surface world.”

“Ya got it, Master! I’ll give it all I got!” a chipper Nazuna

announced.

“Suzu, you’ll be facing the elves’ top marksman, and that race is full of master archers,” I continued. “As a fellow long-range shooter, you’re free to test exactly how skilled your opponent is. This will be your chance to gauge how good you are too. But I must warn you, this guy is the kind of stereotypical elf who uses humans for his own pleasure, then tosses them on the trash heap when he’s done. He disgusts me to my very core, but we won’t kill him straight away, as we need to extract information from him. That aside, you’re free to rough him up all you like.”

Suzu just stood there wordlessly and it was up to her musket Lock to speak for her. “She says she’ll do her utmost to carry out your command, Lord Light.”

“Iceheat. Mera. You two will be taking on the twin elves. I’m told they love to torture humans before killing them, which makes me absolutely sick to my stomach. You two need to make those twins suffer as much as their victims, and break their minds in the process. Think you can do that?”

“I, Iceheat, shall endeavor to live up to your expectations, Master Light,” the brawler maid declared.

Mera cackled uproariously. “I just happen to be an *expert* in breaking minds! Leave it to us, Master!”

“And Jack, you’ll be fighting someone who’s simply the worst,” I said. “Apparently, he wants to end the suffering of humans by exterminating our entire race. He says, since we’re so ugly and weak, he intends to save us from our abject misery. You have no idea how much I want to put that self-congratulatory jackass in his place. So, Jack, put the hurt on that little punk and show him who’s boss!”

“So this prick’s been talking smack, has he?” Jack said, his voice bristling with anger. “You don’t hafta tell me twice, Light, my man. Anyone who comes at any of my human bros before I even get to meet ‘em has to answer to me!”

After I’d addressed each of my warriors, I touched on our last remaining targets. “I will be the one who deals with Sasha and her vice-commander boyfriend. And I will fight them alone. Are we all clear on that?” On hearing a chorus of agreement, I nodded in approval and beamed once more.

“All right, gang, let’s go have ourselves a fantastic Walpurgis Night, shall we?” I said, referring to the night of the year where people light bonfires to exorcise evil from the land. On seeing my wide smile, the expressions on the faces of Ellie and the others turned to ones of boundless excitement mixed in with a huge helping of adoration for me.

We were finally ready to face Sasha and the elves.

Chapter 10: Infiltrating the Tower

The White Knights departed from the Elven Queendom capital before the crack of dawn, traveling by horse-drawn carriage to the edge of the forest to the west, before taking a detour away from the main roads to avoid being seen by other adventurers. This was a secret mission, after all. The White Knights—with Sasha in tow—ventured into the untamed woods a long distance away from the camptown full of questers.

With Sasha leading the way, the White Knights were able to make it all the way to the Great Mystery Tower without encountering much trouble, and with the sun still high in the sky, the party managed to get close enough to the structure to see two snake-tailed monsters leaving the entrance to the tower, bounding across the clearing, and disappearing off into the forest. According to the intel they'd received, there were likely five or six of those quadrupeds prowling around the woods. As if to prove the intel was absolutely on the mark, three more snake-tails suddenly plodded out of the tower and flopped down in the middle of the clearing, seemingly to sunbathe.

Sasha and the White Knights kept their breathing as shallow as possible as they observed the scene in front of them. Sharphat turned to Hardy and whispered to him at a volume only the rest of the team could hear.

“Guess the reports were right. Those things have gotta be around Level 1000,” Sharphat said. “Okay, chief, give the word and I’ll start shooting them from here, though I won’t be able to take ’em all out at once.”

As a Level 2000 fighter, Sharphat was capable of killing one of these beasts with a single well-placed shot, but Hardy immediately dismissed this suggestion. “Our primary target is the dragon. We should not waste energy on pointless battles,” he whispered back.

Considering the difference in power levels, the monsters—the Snake Hellhounds—would be no match for the White Knights, but as of yet, the Elven Queendom’s elite warriors had no idea how strong the dragon living in the tower was, so Hardy felt it wiser to save their strength for the upcoming battle against it. In any case, the White Knights were running to a schedule.

“It should be starting any moment now,” Hardy whispered.

On cue, multiple fireballs shot upward through the forest’s canopy

and exploded above the trees, followed immediately by the war cries of a multitude of people some distance away—a sound that reverberated around the forest. That noise could only mean that the group of adventurers—led by the human party that had brought back intelligence on the tower—had set the decoy operation into motion.

The yelling and whooping disturbed the snake-tailed monsters that were basking in the clearing, and their deep growls indicated they were extremely displeased that this rabble was running around their clearly marked territory. At that moment, yet another snake-tail exited the tower, and the newly formed pack of four Snake Hellhounds bounded off out of the clearing to expel the intruders from their part of the forest.

“I counted six of those snake-tailed monsters leaving the tower,” Hardy whispered to Sasha. “If your report is accurate, that should be all of them.”

“Y-Yes. That’s how many I determined there were,” Sasha murmured back. Despite her stuttering, she was manifestly confident that her estimate was accurate because once she’d discovered the entrance to the mystery tower, she had spent several days—from dusk until dawn—keeping a count of how many monsters were roaming around the tower. There was always a possibility that more of those creatures might be lurking deeper in the forest, but so far as Sasha knew, that was all of them.

“In that case, we will now commence our mission to infiltrate the Great Mystery Tower and slay the Red Dragon,” Hardy whispered. “Assume the standard formation. Miss Sasha, I will be expecting you to fend for yourself.”

The White Knights usually engaged a target with Hardy calling the shots, Mikhael as the shield-wielding protector of the team, Sharphat as the sharpshooter, and Nhia, Khia, and Muste as the raiders. They were confident this setup would be highly effective in dispatching a dragon that only had an estimated power level of 2000, tops.

“Wait a sec, chief. Are we seriously gonna take this Sasha chick into the tower with us?” Sharphat asked.

“I would be worried sick if we left her out here all alone where anything might happen to her,” Mikhael interjected in hushed tones before Hardy could answer. “She would be much safer with me. And besides, she was given a phantasma-class weapon by the count, so I cannot imagine her inconveniencing us at all.”

Sharphat would have an awkward case to make if he were to suggest that the White Knights were incapable of keeping Sasha safe. Though of course, Mikhael’s platitudes were completely hollow; the *real* reason he wanted Sasha to come along was so she could earn yet another crowning achievement that would serve to boost his

ambitions. For her part, Sasha welcomed Mikhael's justification for the White Knights taking her inside the tower, because it would allow her the opportunity to kill Light herself. Thankfully for Mikhael and Sasha, there wasn't any real reason to leave her behind in the forest. Sharphat grimaced with disappointment, but said no more on the subject.

Hardy continued directing his troops. "There is a very good chance that we might encounter other monsters besides that dragon in the tower. Everyone, be sure to take extra precautions as we proceed. Let us move out." Hardy heralded the start of the main mission with a one-word incantation: "Silent!"

Hardy cast a combat magic spell on the team which prevented others from hearing them approach. But because Hardy was Level 3000, his Silent spell was powerful enough to cause those inside the magic bubble to be encased in a deathly hush, meaning they couldn't hear a thing, not even their own heartbeats.

Sasha felt a shiver shoot up her spine as the eerie bubble formed around her. *So this is why they call him "Hardy the Silent"?* she thought. She'd heard rumors about his power, and how this spell didn't just erase noise, but also had the power to drive people insane. Any normal person would only last somewhere between three and ten minutes before Hardy's spell ate away at their psyche and made them crack. Hardy, meanwhile, remained completely unaffected throughout, granting him something of an unfair advantage, since people on the brink of insanity were in no position to fight for their lives. Hardy had used this trick to bury countless champions and monsters, which had earned him his nom de guerre.

Hardy's high power level amplified some of his physical and magical capabilities to the point where they were actually recognized as rare skills. However, Hardy's Silent wasn't simply a spell that canceled out all sound and drove enemies insane; there was another aspect to Hardy's power that was kept under tight wraps by the queendom—a closely guarded secret not even Sasha was aware of.

We're going in, Hardy signaled with his hands—a necessity since no sound could be heard within the bubble. The rest of the White Knights nodded, and once he'd grasped Sasha firmly by the arm, Mikhael also made a sign that they were good to go. Thanks to Hardy's Silent, the team could dash across to the Mystery Tower without having to worry that their footsteps or the rustling of tree branches might give them away. It was only fifteen meters to the edge of the freshly deforested clearing, and beyond that, it was another fifty meters to the sizable entrance to the tower, which resembled the kind of opening you'd be more likely to see in a large storehouse. The White Knights managed to clear the entire sixty-five meters in a

matter of seconds. When they reached the entrance, they paused to peer inside, but it was too dark in there to make anything out. The elves sensed no people or monsters in the vicinity, however.

Hardy signaled for the team to enter the tower, and also wordlessly ordered them to either keep their backs to the walls or hide behind the large pillars once they were inside and advancing through the dark hall. Sharphat—the White Knights’ official scout—waited for everybody to acknowledge this instruction before going in first. The others followed quickly behind him, all of them fully prepared to plunge deep into the tower’s interior, which was as inky and gloomy as the gaping maw of a dark lord. But before anyone could take another step, a curtain of bright light erupted from underneath the entire team.

A teleportation trap?! was the first thought that crossed everyone’s minds.

Even Sharphat, who had been taking extra care to sniff out any potential traps, hadn’t noticed this one. In much the same way that Light had managed to escape the Concord of the Tribes three years prior, Sasha and the White Knights found themselves transported to separate parts of the tower.



“How the heck did Sharphat not notice that teleportation trap back there?” Nhia complained.

“Because that jerk’s scouting abilities have gotten as bad as his taste in women!” Khia pronounced.

The two brothers could do nothing but grumble to each other on finding themselves in an unknown part of the tower. They blamed their unexpected predicament on Sharphat, who they felt—as a Level 2000 scout—should have spotted the trap before they’d blundered into it. And indeed, he rarely overlooked such pitfalls, but this time, the group had stumbled across a trap laid by Ellie, the Level 9999 superwitch who was an expert in all things magic, and there was no one in the Elven Queendom who even stood a chance of sniffing out a booby trap created by her. In other words, Sharphat’s abilities hadn’t diminished at all; he had simply triggered a trap that had been made by someone who was completely out of his league.

Of course, Nhia and Khia were completely ignorant of this, so it was unsurprising that they pinned the blame entirely on Sharphat. And since they were now outside of the magical bubble that had been created by Hardy’s Silent spell, they could hear each other’s moaning clear as a bell. Realizing that this meant anyone else in the immediate vicinity might hear them too, the twins lowered the volume of their complaints, then hid behind two giant pillars as they scoped out the

area for enemies.

There was only one source of light in the room—a small square aperture in the ceiling—but it didn't let in nearly enough light for the twins to get a good look at their surroundings. What they *could* just about make out in the gloom was that the room was filled with rows and rows of pillars at regular intervals, all of which were thick enough to resemble centuries-old trees. Even if there had been enough light to see anything else, the pillars themselves would have obstructed the view of the elves, preventing them from properly surveying their surroundings.

“Judging by the shape of these pillars, it looks like we're still on the first floor of the tower, Nhia.”

“And this place is big enough that the rest of the team have probably been transported to other areas on this floor, Khia.”

“Yup. Guess we'll have to put the dragonslaying on hold for now, Nhia. First, we've gotta find the commander and the others.”

“With you all the way, Khia. Be sure to keep an eye out for any more teleportation traps.”

Even though Nhia and Khia looked young, they'd faced countless crises even worse than this in the past, and they had ample experience when it came to questing through dungeons. All of this meant, when faced with adversity like in this situation, they kept their cool and changed their plans accordingly. After all, there was no need to rush in and attempt to face the dragon alone. If worst came to worst, the twins were even prepared to ditch the dragonslaying plan altogether and leave the tower out of an abundance of caution. Their rather youthful personalities aside, Nhia and Khia were elite White Knights who knew how to act when the going got rough. The only hitch in this contingency plan they had formed was that they were about to face two of the worst adversaries imaginable, who had started conversing behind their backs in the darkness.

“Are you two half-pints the ones we're meant to be fighting?” Mera called out, cackling like a ghostly raven. “Iceheat, would you take a look at these two? I could've handled these pushovers myself!”

“Hey, Mera, stick to the script!” Iceheat yelled at her partner. “I will not stand for anyone snatching a foe away from me!”

“What the...” The twins spun on their heels and came face-to-face with two rather odd-looking human women.

At two meters tall, the one with the creepy, staccato laugh was way taller than the two brothers, and her evil grin with its jagged, sharklike teeth stretched almost literally from earlobe to earlobe. Even though her eyes shone red, she had a more exquisite face than most elf women they had seen, and an eye-pleasing, voluptuous figure completed the package. While opinions may vary, this woman was the

very definition of a femme fatale. But what really set her apart were her clothes: the dress she wore was so long, it covered her feet, and the sleeves of it were equally as long and wide and completely swallowed both of her hands.

The other woman—the one who had referred to her partner as “Mera”—also looked positively statuesque. She was wearing a maid outfit and her billowing skirt ended high up her leg, well above the knee. The only part of her outfit that was markedly out of place with the overall maid look she seemed to be going for were the thick metallic gauntlets she had attached to each hand. She wore her hair in pigtails, with the right half fire red and the left half as blue as ice. This woman was scolding her partner with a look that could draw blood, but rather than this detracting from her overall attractiveness, her cold, sharp glare only served to enhance her more dashing features. Like her accomplice, she was taller than the elves—her height roughly 170 centimeters—but neither woman had triggered Nhia or Khia’s sixth sense as they approached the twins from behind. Nhia and Khia put all their senses on maximum alert and placed their hands on the dual sabers they kept by their sides, one on each hip.

Mera chortled at the reaction of the pair. “Fear not, boys. We’re not gonna snuff you out. At least, not right away. And anyway, you two won’t die no matter how much we grind you into sawdust! You have Miss Ellie to thank for that. She apparently learned some magic tricks from the dungeon core or something, though don’t quote me on that. But whatever it was she did to this place, it’s able to soak up any damage that’d otherwise prove fatal to you. Which means we can rip off all your arms and legs without killing you!”

“‘Miss Ellie’? ‘Dungeon core’?” Nhia repeated.



“Are either of those the name of the dragon living in this tower?” Khia said quizzically. “And anyway, who *are* you people?”

Mera laughed viciously at the pair, waving her sleeve-covered hands back and forth in front of her to indicate they’d got it all wrong. “That dragon was just something Miss Ellie summoned as bait to get you morons to come here. There’s no need to worry your pretty little heads about any dragons now. That one’s already served its purpose.”

Nhia and Khia were starting to get an inkling of how things had really gone down. The Red Dragon had been a ruse to entice the White Knights into the tower since they were the *real* targets in all of this. The two women had said they weren’t going to kill the elves, which meant they only intended to capture them, and apparently, there was someone called “Miss Ellie” pulling the strings. In the strategy meeting prior to the mission, the White Knights had touched on the possibility that some unknown actor might be controlling the dragon, so even though Nhia and Khia were certainly surprised by this revelation, it wasn’t enough of a shock to make them lose their cool.

The eyes of the other woman—the one apparently called “Iceheat”—narrowed even further. “You dolt! Don’t go revealing that kind of information to the enemy! There’s always a chance they could escape!”

“I’m just messing around, Iceheat,” Mera chuckled. “You really think we’d lose to these elf brats?”

“Even if there’s no question of us losing to them, there’s always a chance they might escape by using some tool we don’t yet know about!” Iceheat shouted at her. “You need to use your head!”

“If they try that, we’ll just smash their ‘tool’ before they can use it, dummy!” Mera shot back, cackling uproariously. “You need to take that rod out of your ass, Iceheat.”

“Have you ever heard the phrase ‘a cornered rat will bite the cat?’” Iceheat asked. “It means even the smallest of animals will fight back when trapped. These elves may be many, many levels below us, but you have to take them seriously or they might embarrass you.”

Two humans were totally looking down on Nhia and Khia, which was something that had never happened in their lives up to that point. The two elves—who often purchased human slaves to torture for sport—were blindsided by this blow to their pride as a race. Their pride as fighters was also wounded by this little display. After all, they were Level 1800 Submasters and part of the elite fighting force that was the White Knights. Even if they did have some means of escape up their sleeves, it was no longer an option after being talked about like that.

Nhia and Khia drew their sabers and pointed all four weapons at the two women. The two elves were wearing light armor, meaning

they were equipped for swift attacks.

“I don’t care if they *are* hotter than elf women,” said Khia. “We won’t go easy on them, Nhia!”

“They said we can dismember people in this place without killing them, Khia. So let’s chop off their limbs and take their two mutilated carcasses with us.”

“Sweet idea, Nhia. We still gotta squeeze them for info anyhow.”

“Once we’re done interrogating them, we’ll make them our new toys, Khia. But we won’t kill them right away—not even if they beg us!”

The two powerful elves were in full-on killer mode now, but instead of shrinking back, Mera simply let out her signature cackle again. “Look out, they’ve got swords! Guess you little elf pipsqueaks aren’t all talk after—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Nhia and Khia practically launched themselves at Mera and Iceheat.

“Whoopsy!” Mera uttered.

“Whoa!” Iceheat exclaimed.

The two women dodged left and right respectively to avoid being slashed to ribbons by the elf twins, but Nhia and Khia kept slicing their way toward them through the darkness like gusts of wind, using the pillars as launch pads for their omnidirectional saber attacks.

“You got the wrong rodent, Iceheat!” the sniggering Mera jeered as she dodged the twins’ aerial assaults. “These kids aren’t rats; they’re flying squirrels!”

“Looks like these two still have an attitude problem,” said Nhia.

“They should be ruing their bad luck!” said Khia.

“Bad luck?” Iceheat repeated, shooting a curious look at the acrobatic elves.

“I’ve got no idea why you built this huge-ass tower in the first place...” said Nhia.

“But this place is practically made for our combat style, which means you two are out of luck!” said Khia, finishing his brother’s sentence.

“Oh, now I get it,” Mera said, catching their drift. “Giving you wall-jumpers all these pillars to play with is supposed to be bad for us, huh?”

“You’ll see what we mean soon enough!” said Nhia. “Windcutter!”

“Windcutter!” said Khia.

While Nhia and Khia zipped through the air between the pillars, they both unleashed an unvoiced combat spell, causing air molecules nearby to solidify into sharp-edged projectiles that hurtled toward Mera and Iceheat.

“Ah, I should’ve known elves were capable of this type of attack

too,” muttered Iceheat, who easily dodged the Windcutter.

As Mera adroitly evaded the blade of air that was aimed at her, she quipped, “Are you kidding me? How is *this* supposed to do anything to us?”

But Nhia and Khia didn’t flinch at this remark. Instead, they kept repeating the same spell over and over as they shot between the pillars like two blurs.

“Windcutter! Windcutter! Windcutter! Windcutter!”

Mera cackled uproariously at this display. “Well, now I’m impressed!”

Even though she was somewhat surprised by how the Windcutters were coming at her from all directions now, Mera carried on nimbly sidestepping the blades of air.

Iceheat—who was also busily dodging these attacks—shouted across to her colleague. “Mera! They can’t keep casting that spell forever! Just carry on dodging until they get tired!”

“Nice thought, but you’re facing two White Knights here, remember?” Nhia shouted back at her.

“We can keep this up for around half a day if we want to,” Khia boasted. “And that’s not all!”

Nhia threw a knife at Mera which whistled through the air at a faster velocity than the Windcutter spell and embedded itself into her left thigh. Knowing this knife attack would cause Mera to pause momentarily, Khia had already launched himself off a pillar and was hurtling straight for the same leg. As he zoomed past Mera, he sliced off her foot clean at the ankle with his dual sabers. The twins had executed this combo attack without a word being exchanged, their moves perfectly timed as if they shared the same brain. Not only that, the two elves continued to pinball around the pillars after this successful attack to ensure they couldn’t be captured.

Nhia guffawed triumphantly. “We got her left foot, Khia!”

“Whose limb should we cut off next, Nhia? Should we go for that beanpole again or the chick with the red and blue hair?”

The twins laughed like a couple of kids as they darted around at breakneck speeds, skipping lightly off the pillars. It was clearly their intention to mutilate and torture the two humans who had dared to look down on them, and no matter how much the two women might beg to be spared, it was evident that Nhia and Khia wouldn’t stop until they’d cut off every single one of the women’s limbs. Finding yourself in a situation like this would be enough to frighten even the most experienced of adventurers, but Mera and Iceheat maintained their composure.

Mera casually picked up her severed foot and tossed it up and down in her hand as if it were a sack of coins. “So Iceheat, think it’s

time we stopped faking it for these boys?”

“Faking it?” Iceheat said, an annoyed look on her face. “Well, however you wish to describe it, I believe we have fully ascertained their abilities now. I never imagined they would be this weak, though.” Iceheat facepalmed in disbelief, slapping her face with her gauntlet. “Miss Ellie instructed us to use this fight as a test to see whether we are powerful enough to take on the warriors on the surface world, but it seems as if this might have been a wasted effort.”

On hearing Iceheat lamenting their apparent lack of ability, Nhia and Khia abruptly stopped parkouring off the pillars. There was an air of sincerity to her words, and it didn’t seem like she was attempting to provoke or bluff them. Of course, the twins were pretty teed off at her comments.

“D-Do you women even hear yourselves?” said Nhia. “If this is a trick, we’re not falling for it!”

“You didn’t lay a single finger on us! Not even once!” said Khia. “We were literally in the middle of cutting you down to size!”

Mera screeched with laughter again. “You halfwits really thought you were *winning*?! That knife didn’t scratch me, and you didn’t cut off my foot either! Do you see any blood on the floor? Or on your swords, for that matter?”

Khia gasped as he looked at his sabers, which were completely devoid of blood, just like Mera had said. The chimera then opened her mouth wide like a python and chomped down the amputated foot. The room echoed with the gruesome sounds of teeth gnashing through raw flesh, bones, and tendons till she’d swallowed the whole thing. The shocking scene didn’t end there, however. Mera regenerated her left foot, and waved it around a few times at the elves to show them it was the real deal. She then placed her sleeved hands under her jaw on either side of her neck and yanked upward until her head separated from her body. This act of self-mutilation left Nhia and Khia speechless.

“Oh, right. I forgot to introduce myself,” the severed head of Mera said while it was being tossed around in her hands. “I’m UR Level 7777, Chimera, Mera. And just like your average chimera, I’m made out of all sorts of creatures, meaning every single one of my body parts, right down to the last cell, is its own living organism that can survive by itself. That’s how I could fake having my foot cut off, absorb it again, and grow a new one. Neat trick, huh?”

Nhia’s knife—the one that had lodged itself in Mera’s thigh earlier in the battle—had already been absorbed through her skin, and the monsters living inside her body had quickly digested it. Even though the elf twins didn’t want to accept the grim reality that they were witnessing with their own eyes, they couldn’t keep their teeth from

chattering.

“Y-You can’t be Level 7777!” Nhia screamed at her. “That’s *insane*! Th-That’s like *twice* the power level of our commander!”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right!” Khia followed up. “And the way you just pulled your head off is simply a magic trick to scare us, that’s all! Y-You can’t fool us!”

“A magic trick, you say?” the decapitated head of Mera replied, cackling. “Want me to pull a rabbit out of a hat next?”

This sight shook Nhia and Khia to their very core, but nevertheless, they pointed their weapons at their opponents, ready to recommence battle. “If you’re Level 7777, why weren’t you able to land a finger on us?” said Khia. “That doesn’t make sense!”

“Yeah, it doesn’t add up!” said Nhia. “All you did was dodge our attacks! That *proves* you’re bluffing!”

“We partook in that act to observe how powerful you were and to judge your capabilities,” said Iceheat. “But Mera, your performance was so sloppy, I was worried they were going to see right through us. You need to be more convincing.”

Mera screeched with laughter. “It’s all in good fun. At least we got what we came for!”

Iceheat continued to remind Mera of her perceived shortcomings. During the first exchanges of the battle, Iceheat had made sure to act surprised by Nhia and Khia’s pillar-jumping technique and Windcutter attacks so that the elves wouldn’t be thrown off their stride and she could accurately gauge their abilities. By contrast, Mera had shown almost no commitment to the ruse and had frequently broken character by hurling insults at the elves.

This ongoing banter was cheesing off Nhia and Khia, to the point that they just decided to resume their attacks. “Well, if you’re not bluffing, then try this on for size! Windcutter!” said Nhia.

“You got what it takes to back up those words of yours? Windcutter!” cried Khia.

The twins simultaneously fired Windcutter spells at Iceheat and Mera, but this time, the two women didn’t even bother to move from where they were standing, letting the blades of air score a direct hit. The combat magic didn’t leave a scratch on either of them, however. In fact, if anything, the Windcutters felt like a midsummer breeze to Mera and Iceheat, who didn’t even seem to notice the spells hitting them as they continued to bicker with each other. Nhia and Khia stood rooted to the spot, stunned by this outcome. Finally realizing that the elf twins had just aimed an attack at them that had failed to do much of anything, Iceheat turned and hit the brothers with the awful truth.

“Please excuse me for not introducing myself sooner,” Iceheat said

to them. "I'm UR Level 7777, Frozen Firestorm Grapppler, Iceheat. Low-level attack magic has no effect on Mera and myself."

"Ya got that right!" Mera jumped in. "Our magic defense stats are so off the charts, we don't even need to move a muscle!"

"No way! No way!" Nhia yelled madly. "Windcutter! Windcutter! Windcutter!"

"Something *has* to work! Windcutter! Ice Sword! Thunder Arrow!" Khia cried, firing off all the unvoiced combat magic he had in his arsenal in sync with his brother. But Iceheat and Mera showed no sign of yielding in the face of this barrage of spells. The low-level combat magic seemed to have absolutely no effect on them. It didn't even tickle them.

"F-Fine, we'll just have to carve you up using the hands-on approach!" Nhia declared.

"When we're done, you'll have more holes in you than a fishing net!" Khia announced.

The twins leaped forward again, with Nhia swinging his two sabers and Khia throwing knives at his target with all his might. Nhia's sabers failed to even nick Mera's dress, however, while Khia's throwing knives bounced off Iceheat like they were rubber sticks, clattering to the ground without so much as breaking her skin.

Mera cackled derisively at the twins. "Give it up, elf boys! You can't hurt us with those salad knives! A four-year-old's got a better chance of slicing a boulder with a cardboard play sword!"

"I myself am astonished at the fact you only brought these flimsy weapons with you," Iceheat sighed. "I do not mean to cast doubt on Miss Ellie's judgment, but both of you are so weak, I wonder why we are even using you to test our strength."

It was finally sinking in that all of the elf twins' attacks were useless against these two superwarriors. Horrified screams erupted from Nhia and Khia as they spun on their heels and ran from their opponents. Iceheat and Mera watched on indifferently as the two elves tried to flee.

"Whoopsy! Looks like we scared them so bad, they're heading for the exit," Mera sniggered. "Too bad there *is* no exit and this place is locked up tighter than a coffin!"

"Is this some trick, do you think?" Iceheat mused. "Maybe they're pretending to be running away out of sheer desperation to make us drop our guard?"

"Of course they aren't! You always overthink these things," Mera snapped back. But Iceheat still stared intently at the elves.

"It's always a possibility, even if it is remote," she said. "I'll use my full powers to make sure nothing goes awry."

With a grim expression on her face, Iceheat started infusing her

right gauntlet—which was on the red side of her hair—with mana. Knowing it was no use trying to argue further with Iceheat, Mera shrugged and took a few steps back. As she moved away from Iceheat, long dragon arms sprouted from her sleeves and wrapped themselves tightly around her body, enclosing her in a cocoon. The bloodred arms were covered in thick scales geared toward heat resistance, and they would ensure that Mera would be safe from any attacks from Nhia and Khia too.

Once Iceheat was certain that Mera was adequately shielded in her dragon-arm cocoon, she yelled a summoning spell at the top of her lungs. “O mighty Ifrit! Impart thyself unto my right arm!”



“Who the hell were those freaks?” Nhia said. “Level 7777? Are you kidding me? What happened to the dragon?!”

“D-Don’t ask me!” cried Khia. “We gotta get back to the capital and tell them we’ve got two bigger problems than some dragon!”

“Yeah, you’re right! We gotta hightail it out of this tower and tell the bigwigs what’s up! We are *not* fleeing from the enemy! Anyway, it looks like those overpowered girls aren’t able to keep up with our speed!” Nhia noted.

“If we keep running, we should end up at the exit!” Khia suggested.

Nhia and Khia were sprinting away from Mera and Iceheat as fast as their feet could carry them. Even though they didn’t know where the exit was, they figured if they just kept running, they’d eventually reach a wall, which they could then follow to find the way out. The elf twins were running for their very lives from those absolute freaks of nature whose clothes had barely fluttered when subjected to their deadly Windcutter attack. As they raced away, they glanced over their shoulders to see if the two women were on their tail, but thankfully, they were nowhere to be seen, giving Nhia and Khia renewed hope that they might make it to the exit unscathed. Of course, what they *didn’t* know was that both Mera and Iceheat could have easily caught up to the elves in a second if they’d wanted to, but the two women didn’t feel the need to do so, since the exit had already been sealed shut. Even if Nhia and Khia did end up stumbling across it, their combined strength wouldn’t be enough to pry open the door.

“Nhia! There’s the wall!”

“Follow the wall, Khia, until we hit the exit!”

“Got it!” There was a slight pause. “Uh, Nhia, do you feel something?”

Nhia was initially puzzled by Khia’s comment, but then he too started to sense something was off. “Y-Yeah. Is it getting hot in here?”

It wasn't their imagination; both brothers could indeed feel the temperature rising. At first, it felt like the midsummer sun was beating down on them, but the waves of heat crashing against the two elves quickly intensified until they almost resembled tongues of flames. Nhia and Khia started sweating buckets as the temperature continued to rise, their perspiration mixing with the cold sweat that had broken out over their bodies from realizing they were in mortal danger.

"Wh-What the hell is this?!" Nhia yelled. "Those monsters! Did they build this tower on top of a lava pit?!"

"Nhia! This is no time to panic!" Khia shouted. "We need to protect ourselves somehow before we get roasted alive!"

Khia calmed his brother down by reminding him that they still had one card left to play against the searing heat. If the elves had been run-of-the-mill adventurers, the hot air would already be causing blister burns to break out down their throats by this point, but the twins were able to remain standing—even if only barely—thanks to the Gifts that came with their Level 1800 powers. Nhia nodded to Khia, and the two gave up on their search for the exit, instead focusing all of their energy on saving their hides.

"Magic power, save us twice! Form a wall of glacier ice! Ice Wall!" the twins intoned, casting the tactical-class magic by chanting in unison.

Giant overlapping shards of ice several times their height shot up out of the ground and formed a barrier to protect the elves from the waves of deadly heat. Nhia and Khia specialized in wind magic, which meant when it came to casting combat spells, they didn't need to rely on chants, but when it came to tactical magic like this Ice Wall, it was necessary for them to recite the incantation. The Ice Wall provided a cool, refreshing reprieve from the heat for Nhia and Khia, but their breather turned out to be woefully brief.

"N-Nhia! The Ice Wall! It's melting fast!" Khia cried.

"The heat's *still* rising?!" Nhia exclaimed. "What are those goddamn monsters trying to do to us?!"

"Nhia! Less talk, more magic! We need to put up another wall!"

The first Ice Wall wasn't just melting; it was pretty much being vaporized from the top down. Exposed to the overwhelming heat once more, the brothers quickly repeated the chant. "Magic power, save us twice! Form a wall of glacier ice! Ice Wall!"

However, it took less than a minute for the miasma of heat to break through the glacier wall and assault the elf twins once more.

"No, no, no!" Khia yelled. "Why is this happening to us?!"

"Khia, we have to cast another Ice Wall before that fiery heat overwhelms us!" Nhia's warning calmed his brother down enough for them to build more Ice Walls, but each dam of ice lasted for shorter

and shorter durations.

“Magic power, save us twice! Form a wall of glacier ice!”

“Magic power, save us twice! Form a w—”

“Magic power, save us—”

“Magic—”

Their last attempt might as well have been a drop of water on a hot griddle for all the good it did. Finding themselves out of mana and out of luck, Nhia and Khia were quickly engulfed in an inferno of flames. The blaze broiled the two elf brothers alive as it swept through the entire first floor of the Great Tower.



On emerging from her dragon-arm cocoon, Mera approached the two badly charred lumps that resembled logs with legs sticking out of them. Even though the flames had subsided by this point, the temperature on the first floor was still sweltering from Iceheat’s heat attack.

“Ooh, here they are!” said Mera, screeching with laughter like some crazed mountain crone. “And it looks like the twerps are still alive too.”

Iceheat trailed closely behind Mera, her right eye and the right half of her hair still covered in red-hot flames. She looked down worriedly at Nhia and Khia, whose entire bodies had been seared black from head to toe. But she wasn’t concerned for their survival as much as she was afraid she’d messed up her assignment.

“A-Are you sure they’re alive?” she asked. “I didn’t kill them, did I?”

Mera roared with laughter again. “Relax, kid! They’re breathing all right, though just barely. You just *had* to go overboard, didn’t you?”

Mera gave her associate the side-eye and glanced down at what remained of Nhia and Khia. Not only had their armor and clothes been reduced to little more than flaky embers, the flames had also singed off every single strand of their hair, plus every inch of their bodies was covered in black, third-degree burn eschar. Yet their chests still moved ever so slightly, indicating that the elf brothers were still miraculously alive and breathing.

“Thank your lucky stars Miss Ellie made use of the magic she learned from researching the dungeon core in here,” Mera said to her partner. “Otherwise these two would’ve been full-on cremated and turned to ash before we’d gotten a chance to pump them for info.”

Iceheat let out a sigh of frustration. “I can’t believe they’re this weak!” she lamented. “This is much worse than I was anticipating!”

As Mera had rightly pointed out, the only thing keeping Nhia and

Khia alive at that moment in time was a magical spell that Ellie had cast over the entire tower which prevented anyone from perishing while inside it, even if they wished for death. So even though the twins had suffered gruesome, disfiguring burns from the flames Iceheat had produced, they hadn't succumbed to their injuries. To be more precise about the nature of the magic, a person was still able to sustain the kind of damage that would normally be lethal to them, but Ellie's spell pulled them back from the brink of death and gradually started healing their wounds. In fact, the twins had already recovered to the point where tiny patches of pale skin were starting to appear amid the sea of carbonized flesh.

Always a great believer in self-restraint, Iceheat continued to hold her head in her gauntleted hands out of frustration at going overboard. "I only summoned Ifrit because I needed an area-of-effect attack that would stop them in their tracks! I never dreamed I would burn them *this* horribly! Why would Miss Ellie tell us to test our strength on these weaklings? How is this testing anything?!"

From Iceheat's perspective, all she did was blow a lungful of air at the elves, but they'd ended up in this state. Mera didn't pass up this opportunity to rib her clearly agitated ally.

"I think Miss Ellie was absolutely right to give us this safe space to test our powers on these total pushovers," Mera stated, sniggering. "Imagine if you'd gone on a rampage around the surface world because you didn't know your own strength!"

Iceheat let out a terse gasp of alarm as she pictured the kind of carnage she might have wrought. It took a little time for the warrior maid to calm down again, but once Mera was sure her partner had fully regained her composure, the chimera turned her attention back to the elf twins.

"Guess we'll both have to keep our powers in check while we're up on the surface world. Anyway, it's about time we did what our Master ordered us to do." With her eyes glowing red and a wide, toothy grin splashed across her face, Mera bent her large frame forward and addressed Nhia and Khia. "I'm afraid our dear beloved Master doesn't like you guys all that much. He said you two chumps love torturing and killing humans. Is that right?"

The twins had regained enough strength by this point to make themselves faintly heard.

"H-Help..."

"Help us..."

"He said we're not supposed to kill you, since we still need you boys around so you can cough up what you know," Mera continued, totally unfazed by their appeals for mercy. "But he *also* said we should put you through the same amount of pain and suffering that you

inflicted on all of your victims. So here's what I'm gonna do: I'm gonna break your minds and turn 'em to mush, and I'll do it using a little something I keep for special occasions like this..."

As soon as she said this, slimy appendages resembling worms, centipedes, octopus arms, and squid tentacles slithered out from under Mera's skirt. The pulpy, serpentine mass was the stuff of nightmares and the mere sight of it was enough to drive a person insane. Even Iceheat had to avert her eyes in disgust as the macabre extra limbs extended themselves toward Nhia and Khia.

The two elf brothers whispered softly once more as salty tears welled up in what was left of their scab-encrusted eyes.

"Please..."

"Spare us..."

"*Spare* you?" Mera spat, cackling loudly at the very idea. "Even if I wanted to, did you dopes even once consider sparing any of the people who begged *you* to let them live? Or did you just laugh hysterically in their faces and carry on torturing them like animals? Nope, our Master's not letting you toads off that easy. He ordered us to make you pay for your crimes with your sanity. But you can relax, sweethearts. You won't be like all those victims *you* tormented—at least, not until we've finished squeezing every last bit of information out of you. Till then, you can keep on begging our Master for mercy while knowing that there's no escape from this bone-crushing agony!"

The viscid throng of prehensile appendages wrapped themselves around Nhia and Khia and dragged the two unfortunate elves under Mera's long skirt, where more writhing vermicular monsters awaited them. The sheer horror of it prompted the twins to use the last of their strength to yell out frantically.

"No! No! Don't do this to us! Help! Please, spare us! Help! Arghhhh!"

Nhia and Khia's screams were drowned out by Mera's uproarious laughter that rang all around the shadowy first floor of the tower.

Chapter 11: The Second-Floor Fight

“Wait, I missed a teleportation trap? How’d that happen?” Sharphat muttered to himself as he scanned the unfamiliar surroundings. “The chief’s seriously gonna whale on me for that, and I wish I was kidding.”

Sharphat immediately saw that he wasn’t on the first floor any longer, since the pillars were much thinner here and more randomly arranged, though judging from the material used in construction, it appeared he’d been transported somewhere else in the Great Mystery Tower.

“Well, if I’m not on the first floor, then I guess I must be on one of the other four floors. So would you mind telling me where I am?” Sharphat said, raising his voice and addressing a cluster of pillars that were arranged suspiciously close together. Even though Sharphat came across as rather flippant and laid-back, he was still the third most powerful warrior in the whole of the Elven Queendom, and whereas a regular knight might lose his head and start panicking after triggering an unnoticed teleportation trap, he kept his wits about him and immediately zeroed in on any potential enemies that might be in the vicinity as a matter of course. His heightened senses had told him that there was somebody lurking behind this cluster of pillars, though whoever it was, they weren’t anywhere near big enough to be a dragon, and it couldn’t have been a White Knight or Sasha since they would have spoken up by now. The mystery figure did appear to be anthropomorphic, but that didn’t rule out the possibility that it might be a monster or someone potentially hostile.

After calling out to this hidden figure, Sharphat braced himself for whatever attack or verbal response might be coming his way, and a few moments later, the figure—who had been monitoring Sharphat’s every move since his arrival on this floor—silently emerged from behind the pillars. What Sharphat saw made his jaw drop and his eyes wide. The baby-faced girl (?) was more charming than any elf woman he had ever laid eyes on. The short, wavy locks of her velvety black hair swept around her large doe eyes and her rose-petal lips. She was dressed like a hunter in a short skirt and black tights, plus black boots that came up just short of her knees. In her hand, she was holding a lance-like object that Sharphat couldn’t immediately identify. Sharphat couldn’t stop himself from blurting out, “Whoa, you’re

cute...”

The elf completely forgot about the need to protect himself, so totally entranced he was by this stunning human girl (?) standing before him, though he quickly recovered his senses and straightened out his hair and clothes as best he could before clearing his throat and putting on the best “I’m hitting on you” smile he could summon up.

“So does a cute babe like you have a cute name?” Sharphat asked. “And maybe once you tell me it, we can talk about how a pretty little bunny like you has ended up in a big ol’ sketchy tower like this one. Lemme guess: you’re lost and can’t find your way out. In that case, I can escort you to safety.”

Suzu said nothing, but took half a step back instead, her face contorting with abject revulsion at Sharphat’s attempts at flirting with her.

“What’s up, babe?” Sharphat queried in a state of utter shock because no human girl had ever backed away from his “hot guy” smile before. Soscha—his last girlfriend whom he’d already done away with—would always blush and look thrilled whenever he flashed her this particular smile.

The lance-like object in Suzu’s hands wriggled about and spoke in her stead. “I’m afraid my partner is shy around flirtatious guys such as yourself.”

“An intelligent weapon?” The fact the metal object could talk wasn’t so much of a surprise to Sharphat because he was familiar with intelligent items and weapons that were capable of speech. They were certainly uncommon, since they could only be found in ruins or treasure chests, but they weren’t mind-bogglingly rare.

“I’m Lock, and my partner’s name is Suzu,” the weapon said. “But please don’t feel the need to try to remember our names since we’re not going to be knowing each other for all that long.”

“Oh? And how exactly am I supposed to take *that*, hm?” asked Sharphat. The way it had been phrased had sounded threatening enough for the elf to raise his guard again.

Speaking on Suzu’s behalf, Lock gave the elf a quick rundown of what had happened to him and the rest of his team, telling him that the dragon had merely been a ruse to draw the White Knights to the tower, and as soon as they’d gotten here, Sharphat and his comrades had been scattered to separate parts of the tower to be used as test subjects to gauge the relative strength of various fighters. If Sharphat and the rest of his party wished to make it out of the tower alive, all they needed to do was defeat their opponents. Once Lock had finished giving this overview, Sharphat sighed the sigh of someone who’d been hoodwinked.

“So you guys have been stringing us along this whole time, huh?

Very cool,” Sharphat sneered. “We never would’ve taken the bait if the top brass hadn’t been so busy trying to sabotage one another. Yet it’s guys like me who always end up getting shafted, isn’t it?”

Seeing a potential way out of his predicament, Sharphat turned to Suzu again. “Look, babe, you and me both know why *they* want us to fight. But *I* don’t wanna fight you. In fact, I’ve fallen for you. So come on, babe, work with me here. Let’s set aside our differences and get to know each other!”

Sharphat’s proposal to Suzu was a genuine one—he wasn’t joking around or playing mind games just to get himself out of the sticky situation he was in. If Suzu were to say “yes,” Sharphat would definitely be making her his new girlfriend in place of Soscha, with the only caveat being that the White Knights would need to debrief Suzu once she was in their custody to find out what she knew. Suzu’s response to Sharphat’s offer, however, was to shudder all over out of revulsion and take a couple more steps away from the elf. Suzu whispered something to Lock, who relayed the information to the elf.

“She says you’re totally not her type and you’re a complete turn off.”

“Then, what is your type?” Sharphat bleated desperately. “I’ll be whoever you want me to be, babe! Just tell me what you want, and I’m down!”

Suzu again leaned in to whisper something to Lock. When she’d finished talking, Suzu’s face went beet red, like a girl who’d just blurted out the name of her crush.

“Her type has black hair, is cute and handsome, and is heroic but also nice to everyone...” Lock said, repeating Suzu’s whispers before realizing something. “Wait, isn’t that just Lord Light you’re describing? Look, as your partner and all, I support you, but you’re never going to be in a relationship with him—Hey! Ow! Stop that! How can I be a precision weapon if you wreck my barrel?!”

Suzu had been bashing Lock against a pillar in a crying fit after the musket had wounded her deeply over her feelings for Light. Despite Lock’s protests, the weapon was strong enough to easily withstand this sort of punishment. Sharphat, meanwhile, simply looked on and shrugged.

“It would’ve been awesome if you’d surrendered to my love, babe,” he said. “But one way or another, I *will* make you my conquest!”

As soon as the last word had tumbled from his lips, Sharphat whipped his right arm around and fired a bolt from his Invisible Crossbow. Sharphat’s exaggerated gesticulations while hitting on Suzu had been a classic case of misdirection, hiding the fact that he’d actually been readying his artifact-class weapon this whole time. Each

invisible bolt fired from the Invisible Crossbow had the power to totally obliterate the head of an adult human. But instead of flinching or even glancing in the direction of the invisible shot, Suzu punched the blast away and returned fire with Lock, a mana-imbued bullet emerging from the muzzle with a bang and heading straight for Sharphat.

“Whoops!” Sharphat uttered, but instead of dodging this bullet, he stood his ground and fired off another invisible bolt he’d already loaded into his crossbow. The bolt intercepted Suzu’s bullet and both of them exploded in midair, which signaled the start of the duel between the gunner and the elf marksman.

Suzu and Sharphat took off in opposite directions, dashing across the second-floor arena. This tier of the tower boasted the highest ceilings of all five floors, as well as the most pillars, though they were arranged in a rather disorganized way, which made them perfect for hiding behind. Sharphat used these irregularly placed columns to his advantage, meandering in and out between them and firing off invisible crossbow bolts at every opportunity.

“Yahoo, dude!” yelled Sharphat.

With Lock at the ready, Suzu also silently weaved between the clumps of pillars, using them to shield her. However, Suzu’s movements weren’t born out of desperation, and she stayed composed enough to be able to monitor Sharphat’s every movement. But Suzu’s opponent was every bit as calm and collected as she was, his long blond hair fluttering as he darted about.

“Well, I think that’ll do for a warm-up, pretty bunny,” Sharphat announced. “Now we start playing for keeps!”

Sharphat fired off several invisible bolts in quick succession, taking aim not just at Suzu, but also at various other targets, some of which were above her (?) head, while some were to the right and left of the musketeer, and even behind her. He wasn’t deliberately missing her just to mess with her head, though. This was all part of a calculated trap.

“Wow, you’re able to shoot those bolts up, down, side to side, and even behind my partner,” Lock said, raising his voice over the whistling shots. “Even for an elf, you’re really good!”

“You’re too kind, Lock!” Sharphat said. “But I’m just getting started!”

Sharphat began to fire off his invisible bolts even quicker until the shots virtually filled the entire space. Whenever Suzu darted one way to escape, she found bolts blocking her route, and as soon as she turned in another direction, more bolts cut off this new path too. This pattern repeated itself until the hail of crossbow bolts soon formed what amounted to a virtual cage around Suzu, which was gradually

reducing in size.

This ability owed itself largely to Sharphat's natural talent as well as the power of the Invisible Crossbow. The artifact-class weapon worked by converting a person's mana into "power bolts," with the intensity of each bolt proportional to the mana infused into it. In addition, after firing the projectile, the shooter had the ability to guide it to a certain extent, and unlike a normal crossbow, there was no need to physically fit a bolt and pull a drawstring on the Invisible Crossbow. The weapon automatically did everything for the shooter once he or she had infused the crossbow with mana and taken aim at the target. Sharphat could even change the velocity of the bolt midflight. But even though the Invisible Crossbow was an extremely powerful magic weapon, it was very difficult to handle it perfectly. Anyone above a certain power level could dump mana into the Invisible Crossbow and fire off these "power bolts," but that would in no way demonstrate the weapon's *true* value. Sharphat, on the other hand, had the necessary skills to be able to manipulate the intensity, the speed, and the direction of the bolts he fired from it. He could block an opponent's escape routes, force them into a corner, and finish them off with a direct hit without even missing once.

"What's wrong, little cottontail?" Sharphat shouted over to Suzu. "Is it because you don't like guys who shoot their shots too quickly? Is that why you're forever playing hard to get?"

Suzu didn't respond to this, instead concentrating solely on leaping about and dodging the bolts coming her way. Sharphat continued his one-sided banter regardless. "I gotta say, you're not really crushing it out here, babe. Like, *at all*," Sharphat prattled on. "Or what, you think I'll run out of mana if you just stall for long enough? Not cool, babe. Being all passive like that is a hard pass for me!"

At that moment, Sharphat took aim at where he knew Suzu would be next and fired a powerful bolt, which triggered a massive explosion. Suzu had mistakenly leaped in a direction that had already been blocked off by Sharphat's bolts—an error that had been caused by Sharphat's skill at steering Suzu toward the trap he'd laid for her. The impact of the explosive bolt caused Suzu to stumble and hesitate, which gave Sharphat enough time to change the direction of several of the bolts he'd loosed previously and steer them toward the helpless musketeer. The bolts all struck Suzu at the same time and exploded into clouds of dense smoke that billowed up all around her, but she promptly dashed out of the smoke and retreated to a safer location. Sharphat's surprise attack didn't seem to have done any damage to Suzu, but the elf remained confident that he had the upper hand in this duel.

“Was I too rough on you, babe? My bad, my bad,” Sharphat teased. “Really thought I’d killed you just then with those bolts, but I’m glad to see you’re still in one piece. But I think you’re probably realizing by now that you don’t stand a chance against me, and I really don’t want to mess up that cute little face of yours, Suzu. ‘Lord Light,’ was it? That’s the guy you like? Forget that loser and get with me instead, Suzu. Me and you’ll be awesome together, trust me!”

Suzu’s eyes widened at this, prompting a panicked Lock to yell at Sharphat, “What do you think you’re *doing*?! Do you have a death wish?!”

Suzu’s beloved master, Light, had told her that Sharphat was the best long-distance marksman the elves had to offer. Since Light had also told Suzu to find out exactly how skilled her opponent was, she had concentrated all of her energies on observing her opponent without firing any shots at him, aside from that first one. Suzu hadn’t learned much of anything from this fight, though it did appear that she lost a bit of her edge when faced with showy, almost playful attacks, so in light of that, she didn’t really mind if Sharphat treated her as less than her true abilities. But Sharphat had just crossed a major red line by making fun of Light, the master she revered, had sworn undying fealty to, and yes, had a bit of a crush on. A pall hung over the second floor as her aura of fury expanded, while her innocent, limpid eyes transformed into pools of unhinged bloodlust. *Kill. Kill. Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill-kill-kill!* pounded in Suzu’s head like a jackhammer.

“No, stupid! Calm down!” Lock cried.

“Huh?” Sharphat said, the dark energy exuding from Suzu wiping the “cool dude” grin off his face.

The Level 7777 Double Gunner ignored the musket’s protests and unleashed her full power, pointing Lock up at the ceiling and discharging a firestorm of bullets that made Sharphat’s rapid volley of power bolts seem like child’s play. Suzu easily fired off hundreds of bullets in a span of about ten seconds, firing them all so rapidly that individual gunshots couldn’t be heard, the flurry of musket bursts instead blending together into a roaring crescendo. All the bullets Suzu fired upward froze in midair and formed a wide curtain of lead that blocked the ceiling from view, with every single round waiting up there to hurtle down toward Sharphat, who could only gulp in shock at the sight. Suzu stood silently beneath the hovering barrage, glowering at Sharphat with murder in her eyes.

The fact Lock could talk wasn’t the only thing that set it apart from ordinary weapons. The musket was a magic weapon, which put it in the same category as a sword that shoots flames or a weapon that unleashes wind blades. As an intelligent weapon, Lock created bullets

from Suzu's mana, much like how Sharphat's Invisible Crossbow created its power bolts. Furthermore, Suzu could control the bullets she (?) shot from Lock, and it went without saying that the speed Lock could fire rounds at was on a whole other level from the Invisible Crossbow.

Despite being a White Knight who had faced more life-and-death situations than he could count, Sharphat shrieked in terror at the canopy of bullets overhead. Ironically, the only one keeping their head in all of this madness was Lock.

"Hey, partner!" Lock yelled. "You need to settle down!" But Suzu ignored the musket and ordered the floating hail of bullets to concentrate their fire on Sharphat.

"D-Dude! Are you shitting me?!" Sharphat cried. He focused entirely on sidestepping and dodging the bullets, but even if they missed on their first time through, that didn't stop them from homing in on the elf again with no drop in speed.

"Shit! What the hell?!" Sharphat shrieked. "Magic power, fully flow from my bow! Windrain!"

Sharphat unleashed an ability he only whipped out as a last resort. Normally, the Invisible Crossbow only created one invisible bolt at a time to prevent mana from being wasted and to reduce the burden on the weapon, because magic weapons tended to stop working if used recklessly over a sustained period, sometimes even permanently. With Windrain, however, Sharphat was able to feed uninterrupted mana into the Invisible Crossbow without needing to worry about whether it'd be too much for the weapon to handle. In other words, it was the fastest rapid-fire skill he had in his arsenal. Sharphat also had another trick up his sleeve that involved filling the Invisible Crossbow with the maximum amount of mana it would take and releasing all of it in one blast, but because he needed to fire multiple bolts to counter all of the bullets flying at him, Sharphat opted for Windrain instead.

Sharphat firmly planted his feet and sprayed the immediate vicinity with bolts to intercept the hail of bullets heading toward him, but in the end, it turned out that even his Windrain couldn't measure up to Suzu's normal musket fire.

"My Windrain's not enough against these bullets?" Sharphat cried incredulously. "What kind of freak are you?!"

Suzu's bullets overwhelmed Sharphat's full-powered strafing, so he was forced to concentrate on evading them again. It was as if Sharphat and Suzu had switched places compared to the duel's opening exchanges, except this time around, the elf was about to realize that his opponent's ammunition was far more diabolical than his.

“Graaaagh!” Sharphat yelled out in pain as one of the bullets grazed his shoulder.

The slug sliced through Sharphat’s light armor like a knife through butter, before ripping through his skin and kicking up a thin mist of blood. Of course, the wound was nowhere near fatal, but you wouldn’t have known that from the way Sharphat screeched, the pain so overwhelming he only just barely managed to keep his wits about him.

That was only a scratch, so what’s with this goddamn pain?! Sharphat thought frantically. I’m not feeling too hot either. Wait, poison?!

Sharphat was experienced enough to pinpoint exactly what had happened to him. On a past mission, Sharphat had been injected with venom by a poisonous monster, and that incident served as a reference for this situation. He quickly realized that the magic bullet that had grazed him had pumped his body full of a highly toxic poison. But this poison was much more intense than the monster venom had been, and it was slowing down Sharphat’s evasive movements, in addition to inflicting dizzying pain on him.

Suzu saw her chance and didn’t let it go to waste. With both of her pupils fully dilated and ablaze with wrath, she raised Lock in her right hand, aimed it at Sharphat’s head, and coolly squeezed the trigger. The bullet made from Suzu’s concentrated mana slammed into Sharphat’s cranium and produced a plume of fresh blood. The other bullets Sharphat had been dodging the whole time finally managed to home in on the elf like angry wasps, and they riddled his body with holes before Sharphat even had the chance to collapse. With each direct hit, his body jerked and contorted every which way like a rag doll. And what’s more, every single one of the magic bullets was infused with a status effect: some were poison bullets, like the first round that had glanced off his shoulder, but there was a whole range of ailments the bullets could cause, such as bleeding, confusion, blindness, curse, paralysis, hypnosis, hallucination, debilitation, mental clouding, and so on.

In short, Suzu could fire bullets with magical elements, and it only took a scratch from one of her rounds to deal a status ailment to the hapless target. Suzu had fired hundreds of these magic bullets and they were all presently shredding their way through Sharphat’s body, conferring their status ailments on the elf in the process. It was only when the last airborne slug had whistled through Sharphat that he was allowed to crumple to the floor in a heap. Yet, despite resembling a honeycomb due to the amount of bullet holes he had in him, Sharphat was still very much alive, thanks to Ellie’s immortality spell.

Suzu wasted no time in striding over to the fallen elf and aiming a swift, booming kick at him, propelling him through the air like a

leather ball. Sharphat crashed against a pillar, then tumbled heavily to the ground again. But Suzu wasn't anywhere near done yet. She went up to Sharphat again, and when the elf looked up at her, the last thing he saw while conscious was the sole of her black leather boot. The first heel smash to the face rendered Sharphat comatose, but Suzu kept furiously stomping on the same spot over and over, each blow eliciting a sickening crunch.

"Hey! Get a hold of yourself!" Lock yelled at Suzu. "Don't you realize that, the way you're stomping on him right now, he can see straight up your skirt?"

On hearing her musket's warning, Suzu immediately froze and regained her composure—or rather, her sense of shame. She quickly flattened down her skirt and backed away from Sharphat, who was barely breathing anyway by this point. Even though Suzu's face was completely red from embarrassment, she (?) had finally settled down, which gave Lock the opening it needed to further upbraid its wayward partner.

"You've really done it this time," Lock told her. "Don't you remember what Lord Light said? How are you supposed to test your skills if you just shoot him to pieces?"

This reminder had the effect of turning Suzu's flushed face suddenly pale. The whole purpose of this exercise had been for the musketeer to find out how she measured up against Sharphat, the best marksman the elves had to offer, and during the initial exchanges, she had made a point of refraining from directly engaging with her opponent so that she could focus on simply observing him. She had also kept her power level a secret so that it wouldn't prejudice the fight in any way. But the moment Sharphat called Light a "loser," all bets were off, and Suzu disproportionately punished the elf as blind fury took hold of her.

Suzu looked frantically to Lock for an answer on how she could redeem herself, but the musket dashed her hopes. "There's nothing we can do now, partner. Even if we restore him back to full health, his psyche won't be in any condition to fight anymore. It'd just be a waste of healing magic."

Suzu crouched down and hugged her knees, tears welling up in her eyes because she knew Lock was right. Even though it had been entirely Suzu's fault that she had lost control and brutalized Sharphat, Lock attempted to console her.

"Don't worry, it's fine," Lock said reassuringly. "Lord Light is too kind a person to get mad at you over this. He won't throw you out."

Suzu shot a quizzical look at Lock, who continued to pacify the crestfallen musketeer. "Trust me on this. I'd never lie to you."

When all was said and done, it ended up taking Lock longer to lift

Suzu out of her melancholy than it had taken Suzu to defeat Sharphat.

Chapter 12: The Third-Floor Fight

“Good! I was wonderin’ when you’d show up!” a thuggish-looking human with a booming voice bellowed at Muste, who only moments before had found himself whisked away by a teleportation trap. “I’m UR Level 7777, Ironblooded Barricade, Jack! Come at me, kid!”

The man addressing the elf was nearly two meters tall and lean with well-defined muscles. He was also topless, save for a coat he was wearing like a cape, and even though he looked quite handsome for a human, that was overshadowed by his fierce, brutish demeanor.

Muste didn’t make any response to the jibes from this human called “Jack,” but he did keep an eye on him as he surveyed his surroundings. Although Muste was the youngest member of the White Knights, he’d been in more than enough crisis situations in his own right to know how to comport himself when placed in unfamiliar surroundings.

“There’s no need to look around, guy,” said Jack. “This is the third floor and it’s just you and me here. You won’t find any traps neither, for that matter.”

Muste treated the solitary unarmed human to a look that was a mix of suspicion and doubt. “Are you serious?”

Jack flashed the elf a rugged grin. “All we’re doing is fighting, mano a mano!” Jack declared. “We don’t need gimmicks, tricks, or whaddever! Either I smack you down or you smack me down, capeesh?!” Jack sized up the elf briefly before continuing in a more sober tone. “But from what I’m seein’, you’re punching way above your weight class, slim. I ain’t into bullying people with power levels that are way beneath mine, so tell ya what: if you give in now, I won’t hafta hurt you. Your call, guy.”

This human was offering to go easy on Muste, a proud elf and a White Knight. All Muste heard was his dignity being insulted. “Did you say you were Level 7777?” Muste asked. “I’m afraid that’s not a very good bluff. That power level isn’t even remotely realistic for a human.”

“It ain’t a bluff, and I ain’t hidin’ nothing either,” Jack replied. “Don’t believe me? Then, use Appraisal to check me out, if ya got it.”

As it happened, Muste wasn’t capable of performing an Appraisal, so Jack’s rather reasonable statement just seemed like another taunt from a lowly human to the elf. Furrowing his brow, Muste hefted his

halberd into the air and assumed a fighting stance.

“I don’t need to use Appraisal, since I can test your claim by battling you,” Muste stated. “I shall defeat you here, then find my way out of this place.”

“Ya got that right!” Jack shouted, grinning from ear to ear. “We don’t need no Appraisal skill! We can just slug it out and see who’s better! I gotta hand it to you, guy, you’re smarter than I thought!”

Muste stared at Jack as if he were a madman. “The fact that you don’t even know how weak you are compared to me shows how ignorant you humans are. I will end your suffering with one blow, and send you into the waiting arms of the Goddess!”

Muste rushed toward Jack and swung his halberd at the human’s neck with the kind of lightning speed that had been honed by years of training. A blow from this attack could even gravely wound Hardy himself if he copped the full force of it without taking any measures beforehand to protect himself.

“Too slow, chud!” Jack said as he lazily swatted away the halberd like it was little more than a wooden ruler. The force of the deflection reverberated down through the halberd’s handle, numbing Muste’s hands with pain and sending him flying backward through the air. Even though the elf managed to land on his feet, the sheer force of the blow meant he continued to slide backward, his heels digging shallow grooves in the floor. This put Muste at a safe distance from Jack, giving the elf time to look in shock at his arms, which were throbbing all the way down to the bone. By some miracle, Muste was still holding his halberd in spite of the pain.

How did he repel my attack so easily? Muste thought. Not even the commander is capable of that. Does this mean he really is Level 7777?!

Muste gritted his teeth as it dawned on him that he really might not have a fighting chance against this opponent, given that his own power level hovered somewhere above the 2000 mark. But just as he was on the verge of losing all hope, Muste’s sense of righteousness returned and he hollered over to Jack.

“I refuse to be defeated by the likes of you!” Muste declared. “I must save the White Knights, the Elven Queendom, and everyone else that depends on me, so defeat is not an option!”

“Oh, here we go. Out comes the savior complex ya got for your people and ‘everyone else,’” Jack said, mocking the elf’s words by putting them in air quotes. “And I’m guessin’ you count the human race as part of that ‘everyone else,’ huh? Stop me if I’m wrong.”

Jack continued to scoff at the red-haired elf. “Look, my broski Light’s told me all about you. Like how you wanna save all humans from our ‘miserable existences’ by killing every last one of us. Dude, how’s that absolute dog vomit supposed to save anyone?”

“But...” Muste started. “But it’s the only solution for a race that’s so weak, unsightly, and unfit to survive. It’s better to exterminate the humans than allow them to live such wretched lives. Would you leave a man mortally wounded on the battlefield to suffer in agony until he breathes his last? Or would you kill him out of mercy and humanity? It is the same concept. Why don’t any of you understand that?”

“What are you, tweaked?” Jack sighed. “Something must be very wrong with you if you seriously believe that crap.”

Angered by this slight, Muste raised his halberd once more, the pain in his arms having worn off by this point. “I guess no matter how strong you may seem as an individual, all you humans are inferior,” Muste said. “I should have known better than to expect an inferior to understand my noble principles. Now I *have* to defeat you, for the sake of everybody! Stoutarm Halberd, grant me the power to crush this foe!”

Muste’s magic weapon, the Stoutarm Halberd, glowed from tip to tip, indicating that the elf had unleashed his ultimate power move. The Stoutarm Halberd was an artifact-class weapon that had been passed down through the generations in Muste’s baronial family, and it was so exceedingly rare, even if an A-rank adventurer wanted it, there was no way they could obtain it.

The Stoutarm Halberd’s power was quite simple: it greatly elevated the stats of the person wielding the weapon. The only drawback was that this buff wasn’t indefinite, lasting for a mere three minutes or so, but in that brief time, Muste became strong enough to fight Hardy the Silent on an equal footing. That was why people considered Muste the favorite to succeed Hardy as the next commander of the White Knights. However, Muste was presently facing a fighter who claimed to be Level 7777—an opponent who had easily deflected one of his strongest attacks.

“More! I need more! Grant me more power to crush my enemy, Stoutarm Halberd!”

The Stoutarm Halberd glowed even brighter, infusing Muste with enough energy to burst the capillaries in his eyes and cause tears of blood to stream down his cheeks. In fact, Muste was shaving years off his life just so he could gain enough strength to put Jack in the ground.

“You’re a preachy, self-righteous jackhole, but at least you’re willing to fight for your janky beliefs,” Jack said as he tossed his coat from his shoulders in grandiose fashion. “But quick heads-up: I ain’t pullin’ any punches, neither. A man’s gotta have his pride!”

Muste hadn’t heard Jack’s clapback because the elf had been screaming at length the whole time. Muste was even at the point of sacrificing part of his soul in order to absorb power past any

reasonable limit. By the end, Muste possessed the kind of might, speed, and intensity that could only be attained in this one brief moment in his life. Holding the Stoutarm Halberd aloft, Muste unleashed his new overpowered attack.

“Ironblooded Barricade!” Jack cried out.

Jack doused himself in his own blood, which then hardened into full-body armor tougher than almost any protective apparel worn by the warriors of the Abyss. At the same moment that Muste swept his Stoutarm Halberd toward him, Jack roared and countered by swinging his iron fist. Jack’s crimson skintight protective suit made of blood and mana doubled as a near-invulnerable weapon in its own right when combined with Jack’s extraordinary arm strength and punching speed. When Jack’s fist connected with the Stoutarm Halberd, not only did the magic weapon shatter like brittle glass, the follow-through sent Muste flying through the air at a velocity that nearly saw him breaking the sound barrier.

Muste’s screams lasted for the duration of the short flight before being abruptly cut short when he collided full-force with the tower wall, the impact leaving a sizable crack in it. The elf tumbled to the ground unconscious and lifeless, his armor smashed to pieces. The only thing keeping the spark of life from departing his broken body was Ellie’s immortality spell that had been cast on the tower. Without that spell, the force of Jack’s punch would have pulverized Muste into unrecognizable mush.



Although Jack's fist had been subjected to the full force of Muste's ultimate attack, the halberd hadn't left a single scratch on it. In fact, his hand was so completely unaffected by the blow that it was like he hadn't even lifted a finger. Although Jack had come out victorious, he felt no joy at winning such an easy fight. All he could do was peer down at Muste with a look of puzzled reproach on his face.

"I gotta hand it to you, facing me head-on like that takes balls," said Jack. "But your 'principles' or whatever you wanna call 'em are total hot garbage and a major barrier to me ever considerin' you bro material. I mean, seriously, guy..." He sighed. "Are all elves as cracked as you are?"

Chapter 13: The Fourth-Floor Fight

“I’m Nazuna, the strongest fighter in Master’s army! Which means I’m the toughest to beat!”

The first thing Hardy the Silent saw after being transported who knew where by the teleportation trap was a girl around half his size standing in front of him. She was wearing armor, had bloodred irises, and had long platinum-colored hair. Even though she looked like a short yet busty heiress, she was wielding a broadsword that dwarfed her diminutive stature, which made for a near-comical visual contrast.

Hardy could hear the tautological bombast from this girl calling herself “Nazuna” quite clearly, which indicated that his Silent spell had been canceled out somehow—perhaps as a result of the teleportation trap. When Hardy moved slightly to take in his surroundings, he could hear the sound of his armor scraping against itself too.

I do not appear to be on the first floor any longer, but it seems that I am still in the tower, thought Hardy.

The construction of the pillars, the floor, and the walls was similar to that of the first floor, but here, the pillars were arranged in a circle along the wall, making the space look a bit like a large courtyard on an aristocrat’s estate. There didn’t seem to be anyone else on this floor besides the girl, and the open nature of the area made it an ideal place for engaging in all-out combat.

“Hey! Are ya listenin’, gramps?” Nazuna yelled at him. “Ya don’t get to ignore me!”

Hardy’s face remained impassive as he placed his right hand on the sword strapped to his back. “I am listening. I assume you are my enemy.”

“Yup!” Nazuna said cheerily. “You’re the most powerful elf of all, ain’tcha? Master told me to test my strength against ya to see how good I *really* am!”

“Is that so?” Hardy calmly unsheathed his sword and assumed a fighting stance. As the White Knights’ commander, Hardy had fought countless battles, some of which had seen him facing monsters who looked like children much younger than Nazuna, so he wasn’t about to show any mercy to the opponent that stood before him, no matter what she looked like.

Judging from Nazuna’s words, it seemed she had a “master” who

not only created this tower, but also purposefully had the teleportation trap set up to split up the White Knights. Leaving aside the part about the desire to see her “test her strength,” the motives of this unseen handler remained a mystery. What Hardy *could* tell though, was that the girl in front of him was definitely a cut above ordinary fighters. *But that is all there is to her*, he thought.

However skilled this “Nazuna” girl was, there was no way she would be a match for Hardy the Silent. He planned to incapacitate the girl quickly, then pump her for information, which would no doubt involve a lot of pain for her. Once he had all the details he needed, he would reunite with his team, slay the Red Dragon, capture this tower’s “master,” then extract more information from them before a summary execution. For Hardy, battling an enemy alone, separated from his team, was all part of the job.

“Now we fight,” Hardy said laconically.

“Yeah! Let’s make it fun!” Nazuna said cheerily.

She doesn’t seem to be an inferior child... thought Hardy. Is she demonkin? Her sword and armor appear to be infused with a considerable amount of mana.

Nazuna gripped her broadsword too, her pupils elongating vertically in anticipation of the battle. The weapon and the armor the girl was wearing were obviously much heavier than she was, yet her movements seemed completely unhindered by their weight, which ruled out the possibility of her being human. The way Nazuna raised her sword indicated to Hardy that she was an unusually strong fighter who was fully capable of going toe to toe with him in a fight to the death, but he maintained his composure and prepared for the fierce, hard-fought battle they were about to engage in. Both opponents were armed with large swords and wore heavy armor, so neither had any perceived advantage on that front.

Nazuna roared a battle cry as she leaped forward, her broadsword swinging around quick as a flash. The sword found its target and ripped through Hardy’s own weapon and armor, and left a deep, gaping wound across his body. The sheer force from Nazuna’s sword swing had also blasted a hole large enough to see through to outside in the tower wall behind the elf. Having been completely stunned by the blow, Hardy slumped to the floor, unconscious.

“What? That’s it?” asked Nazuna, who was still holding her sword where it had ended up at the completion of her follow-through.

Even though Nazuna had put all of her strength into that first swing, she’d only meant for it to force Hardy back slightly to sound him out. She’d figured Hardy would have deflected or blocked the blow, at which point, she would have closed the gap to her opponent and crossed swords with him in earnest. But with Hardy slumped on

the ground, her momentum had nowhere to channel itself, so she gradually allowed her muscles to relax. Though she immediately went tense again when the Forbidden Witch, Ellie, contacted her using a Telepathy card.

“Nazuna!” Ellie screeched at her through the mental link. “Was that you who just put a hole in my tower wall?!”

“I-I didn’t break anything!” Nazuna protested. She didn’t mean to fib, but Ellie sounded like she was about to bite her head off, and it was just a reflex.

Ellie lowered her Telepathy voice an octave, but she still sounded vexed. “I know you’re lying to me! I thought I told you these walls automatically repair themselves with my mana! I even infused the walls on your floor with *more* mana than all the other floors—except for the topmost one, of course. I did that to make sure your powers wouldn’t be noticed by anyone on the lower floors! Yet your walls have just drained me of so much of my mana I almost fell on my backside right in front of Blessed Lord Light! On my backside!”

“S-Sorry, Ellie!” Nazuna pleaded aloud. “I didn’t mean to!” She completely empathized with Ellie, because the thought of being embarrassed like that in front of their beloved master made Nazuna go pale. As if to prove what Ellie had just said, the wall had slowly started repairing itself.

“I bet you’ve already defeated Hardy because you don’t know your own strength, haven’t you?” said Ellie. “I can understand you getting overexcited about being picked for your first assignment up on the surface world, but you need to learn how to restrain yourself a bit. Everyone knows how powerful you are, but moderating that power is something you struggle with, isn’t it? If you don’t fix that, Blessed Lord Light won’t bring you on any more missions to the surface world because you’ll just cause too many needless casualties. Is that what you want, Nazuna?”

“N-No, I don’t,” she admitted.

Ellie sighed through the mental link. “Well, in that case, you need to do better. I’m willing to let this slide, but I’m begging you, try not to destroy the tower wall next time.”

“Okay, ya got it,” Nazuna said. “Sorry, Ellie...”

“I know you’re sorry. Just don’t do it again!” Ellie reprimanded her.

Somewhere toward the end of this telepathic conversation, Hardy had regained consciousness and gasped a grunt of pain. He quietly chanted a tactical-class healing spell that would restore him to fighting condition once more. “Magic power, heal my core. Save my soul from death’s dark door. Midheal.”

“Oh, he came to!” Nazuna cried happily.

“Only because my spell kept him alive,” Ellie said, still using the Telepathy card. “Now he’s healing himself so he can fight again. Are we clear, Nazuna? You will use him to test your abilities, but don’t overdo it! At the very least, refrain from destroying my walls!”

“Yeah, I hear ya! I’ll keep myself in check!” Nazuna assured her. She severed the Telepathy link, then waited for Hardy to heal his wounds and get to his feet. It took him a good three minutes before he was ready to do battle once more.



I knew she was no ordinary fighter, but I clearly overestimated my own strength and paid for it dearly, thought Hardy. I have become too accustomed to people lauding me as Hardy the Silent, commander of the White Knights and the strongest elf alive, yet over the past few years, all I have done is destroy a few villages full of inferiors, and those creatures put up less of a fight than goblins. As a result, I have allowed arrogance to weaken my mental fortitude. I need to learn from this painful experience and realign my mindset.

Even though Hardy was down, he considered himself lucky to have survived. Part of that luck probably lay in the fact that his epic-class weapon, the Executor Sword, had taken the brunt of Nazuna’s blade strike, and as a result, Hardy had managed to avoid an instant death. Another way in which Hardy felt he had been lucky was that his enemy—Nazuna—hadn’t decided to finish him off after he blacked out. Instead, she had kept her distance and simply watched him heal himself. *This is probably her first real fight, so she is likely too timid to attack me again and finish it, thought Hardy. She has just wasted a very rare chance to slay me.*

Once Hardy was done healing, he stood up with a stifled grunt and faced Nazuna again, who had clearly lost all of the cockiness she had initially exhibited. In fact, she seemed to be shrinking away from him, and hadn’t said a word this entire time. Hardy kept Nazuna firmly in his eyeline as he spat out the blood that had pooled in his mouth.

“I must apologize,” Hardy announced. “Due to my personal circumstances, I failed to take you seriously as a fighter. This time, however, I shall unleash all the power I possess.”

“Uh, right!” Nazuna replied nervously. Beads of sweat had formed on her brow and she seemed to back away even further. This level of apprehension confirmed to Hardy that this was indeed Nazuna’s first battle, and she was getting cold feet now that she had realized this would be a harrowing fight to the death.

I should watch out for her raw power and that sword. Hardy had known from the start that Nazuna’s broadsword was something

completely out of the ordinary. *Is it an epic-class weapon? No, a blow from that sword nearly killed me, so it must be a phantasma-class weapon.*

If Nazuna's sword wasn't phantasma-class, then by definition, it should never have been able to cut through Hardy's sword as cleanly as it did. Hardy glanced down at the Executor Sword in his hand, which was little more than a hilt and half a blade now.

I have figured out her tricks, thought Hardy. This girl has power that belies her youthful appearance, and she is armed with a phantasma-class broadsword. Her power level may well be close to the 3000 mark.

Since she wasn't human, there was no way she could be a Master. Perhaps she was a Submaster like Hardy? But then, what was she doing in this mystery tower? Who was this master the girl apparently served? In that moment, a whole host of questions swam around Hardy's head, but he figured he could get all the answers he needed once he'd neutralized and captured Nazuna. Though, to do that, Hardy would need to unleash his full might.

"Silent! Silent Reverse!"

Hardy cast a rarely used version of the Silent spell, the combat magic that had been upgraded to a special skill due to his power level. The normal application of Silent was to keep others from hearing the caster and any others within its area of influence, but in Hardy's hands, the spell was capable of erasing every sound within the effect bubble, even one's own breath.

Hardy trapped Nazuna inside his Silent bubble with him, which seemed to startle and bewilder the girl. Any normal person would be baffled by being robbed of one of their five senses, and after spending anywhere between three and ten minutes inside its area of effect, they would be stark raving mad. Hardy himself, meanwhile, would remain completely unaffected. The spell also had other effects that had been kept under wraps by the queendom. One of these effects was that Silent incrementally debuffed an enemy's stats proportional to the time they spent within the effect bubble, and what's more, this debuff only impacted those Hardy had identified as a foe. The longer the enemy stayed inside this Silent bubble, the weaker and more debilitated they became. The damage it did was extensive, but the process was so muted, the victim wouldn't even notice until it was too late.

The higher-ups in the Elven Queendom were privy to this confidential secret, but there was another effect that was known only to Hardy and his mother, Queen Lif VII: Silent Reverse. With this effect, the stats consumed by the debuff were transferred to Hardy, who stockpiled them to access at a later date, when he really needed them. Hardy had stored up hundreds of years' worth of leached stats through Silent Reverse, and he chose this moment to activate all of the

stat buffs at his disposal to lift his power level into the 4000s. The elf was prepared to gamble everything he had to defeat Nazuna.

In the deafening hush, the two fighters faced off against each other. But Hardy wasn't done powering up. The White Knights' commander mouthed a spell to unleash a secret weapon he had never mentioned to anyone, not even his own mother. If it weren't for the Silent spell dampening all sound in the vicinity, an onlooker would have heard him say, "O Silent Power, form thyself in quietude and strike down mine enemy in thy soundless interlude. Hermit Blade!"

Hardy transmuted his Silent spell and repaired his broken Executor Sword with the Hermit Blade. Thanks to this rare skill, he now wielded a large sword made of solidified mana, though this "silent blade" could only be visualized and perceived by Hardy, its wielder. To others, the blade couldn't be seen or sensed, nor would they be able to even hear the blade slicing through the air to cut them open. Those cut down by the stealth blade often had no clue what type of attack they had just been on the receiving end of.

Now that he was fully prepared for battle once more, Hardy stood at the ready with his newly restored Executor Sword in his hand—though to Nazuna, it looked like he was still holding a broken blade. Nazuna soundlessly cleared her dry throat, and to Hardy's surprise, she sheathed her sword in the scabbard tied to her back and got ready to do battle with her fists tightly clenched.

Has she put away her sword because she thinks she will not be able to keep up with the speed at which I can swing my now-shortened sword? thought Hardy. *This child has certainly made an audacious choice.*

Hardy was honestly impressed by Nazuna. After all, she had managed to inflict a life-threatening injury on him. If Nazuna hadn't been his enemy, he would've sought to recruit her as a full member of the White Knights. But Hardy's present mission was to defeat this young girl, and he would do that with the newly attained Level 4000 powers coursing through his veins.

However audacious you may be, there is nothing you can do to win this, he thought. *I have become a completely different fighter now, thanks to my Silent Reverse. I have powered up to a level that far surpasses any other elf, and my invisible Hermit Blade is the same size as the Executor Sword you broke. I am as ready as one can possibly be to battle you, and I will emerge victorious.*

Hardy slowly closed the distance between him and Nazuna, and he noticed her forehead was dripping with sweat. Neither fighter seemed to want to make the first move, and the two warriors stared at each other, engaging in a quiet battle of nerves—so quiet, in fact, they didn't need the Silent bubble around them to dampen any of the sound. Nazuna kept both of her fists raised and was clearly trying to

gauge the right time to leap forward and strike.

When the tension finally became unbearable, Nazuna lunged first, positioning her body low as she darted forward to avoid the elf's inevitable attack. But Hardy was able to track Nazuna's every move and—

“Gwagh!”

Unfortunately for Hardy, Nazuna's lightning fist buried itself in the elf's abdomen before he could even move a muscle. Hardy retched violently as he was hurled backward, his body instantly making a crater in the wall on the far end of the room as he struck it full-force. On seeing the end result of her attack, Nazuna did a fist pump with the same hand she'd used to send Hardy flying.

“Yes! I didn't break the wall this time!” Nazuna yelled triumphantly. “I can do anything as long as I set my mind to it!”

Nazuna hadn't, as Hardy had thought, sheathed her broadsword because she was facing what looked like a much shorter blade. She'd simply figured she would be better at controlling her strength by using her fists rather than her sword. And it wasn't Hardy's power-up that had made Nazuna sweat either. No, she was worried about whether she would be able to suppress her strength enough to stop herself from making another hole in the outer wall. And while Hardy's shattered body had made a huge indentation in the wall, the structure had—just barely—maintained its overall integrity, which to Nazuna meant she'd passed with flying colors. Though just as Nazuna was starting to celebrate her achievement, another Telepathy link was established between her and Ellie.

“Nazunaaa...” the witch wailed, her voice seeming to echo from the depths of Hell itself.

“Eep!” Nazuna whimpered. Tears welled up in her eyes and the Vampire Knight launched into a full-throated defense of her actions. “What is it now, Ellie? I controlled myself just like ya told me to! See? I didn't break the wall! Why're ya pickin' on me?!”

“Because your definition of ‘not breaking the wall’ is not putting a hole through it!” Ellie yelled at her. “What I actually *wanted* you to do was *not* damage the walls so much that they need major repairs! Are you *trying* to drain all of my mana in this one little fight? You're simply unbelievable! How many times do I have to tell you *not* to overdo it?!”

“B-B-But I really did try my darndest this time!” Nazuna protested and began wailing like an infant with colic. “Masteer! Ellie's being mean to meee! She's such a mother-in-law!”

“You're calling *me* a mother-in-law?!” Ellie shrieked. Nazuna had gone as far as crying and asking Light for help, even though he was never going to hear her, considering she was down on the fourth floor.

This juvenile behavior only angered Ellie more and added more fuel to the fire. As a result, the two spent the next few minutes squabbling over their Telepathy link.

Meanwhile, Hardy's battered body remained embedded in the wall, with the elf down for the count this time. The wall gradually repaired itself and gently displaced Hardy's body until he eventually peeled off and flopped lifelessly to the floor.

Chapter 14: Three-Year Reunion

“Are you okay, Ellie? It looks like you lost a lot of mana.”

“I...” Ellie started, then smiled bravely. “I’m fine. I still have plenty of mana left. It’s just that Nazuna’s causing so much damage on her floor, it suddenly sucked mana out of me, and whenever that happens, I can feel it in my legs. But don’t worry. The mana I’ve lost will eventually restore itself.”

I decided it would be impolite to pry any further, so I decided to change the subject. “So...” I started. “I see the fourth-floor battle is going pretty much as expected. Though I didn’t think it would end *that* quickly.”

“She was facing a Level 3000 elf,” Ellie said simply. “It just proves he wasn’t much of an opponent to begin with. Though I really thought he would fight her using some kind of weapon or power known only to the Elven Queendom.”

“They call him ‘Hardy the Silent’, so I figured he had to have something big up his sleeve,” I said. “But I guess all he did in the end was some leveling up and create an invisible blade. Not that raising your power level to 4000 would do any good against Nazuna. Well, anyway, Nazuna captured him, so I guess we can say she carried out her mission successfully.”

“I hope this teaches her the value of controlling her own strength,” Ellie sniffed.

“Mrrow,” Aoyuki purred.

We were all on the fifth floor, and I was sitting on my throne, receiving reports on how the various tower battles were going. The White Knights and Sasha had entered the tower and set off the teleportation trap Ellie had made for the express purpose of scattering them to separate floors. Nazuna had been the first to win her battle, beating the commander of the White Knights on the fourth floor, and it looked as though the fights on the other three floors were close to wrapping up as well. In fact, Nazuna’s fight was so quick, the lecture she got from Ellie actually took longer.

Ellie was standing on my left, next to the throne, while Aoyuki was on my right. Aoyuki was monitoring activity both inside and outside the Great Tower using the mental links she had established with covert monsters that had been deployed to a number of locations. Ellie had cast restoration spells to keep the elves alive, while also

making sure the tower remained perfectly intact.

Thanks to Ellie's restoration spells, my fighters were able to whale on the elves all they wanted without the need to worry about accidentally going overboard and killing them. Her magic also ensured the elves weren't able to escape by simply breaking through the walls. Those weren't the only effects of Ellie's spells, but the common thread was that everything came at the cost of consuming her mana. When Nazuna had caused extensive damage to the tower in her fight against Hardy, Ellie had let out a little breathy moan and her legs had buckled and trembled like a newborn fawn's. The first time it happened, I wondered what was going on with her, but she quickly explained that this reaction was the result of a sudden unexpected drop in mana. She added that if she'd known her mana was going to be depleted beforehand, she would have been able to withstand the hit without flinching.

I could see how a person might not be surprised if someone they knew came up behind them and shouted loudly in their ear, but would they really make that weird sound Ellie had made if that hollering was completely unexpected?

After recovering from this abrupt loss of mana, Ellie asked for my permission to use the SR Telepathy card, so that she could chide Nazuna. Not long after that first upbraiding, Ellie gasped another little moan and proceeded to give Nazuna another dressing down via Telepathy. Even though I pitied Nazuna, her plight was totally out of my hands. All I could do was smile awkwardly as I left Ellie to yell at Nazuna.

When she was done, Ellie sighed and placed a hand on her temple, as if a headache had come on. "I know Nazuna is strong, but she still behaves like *that*. Perhaps she acts like the youngest child because she was the last SUR card you summoned, but due to that childish disposition of hers, everyone goes easy on Nazuna, one way or another. We need to do something about how we act toward Nazuna for her own good."

I agreed with Ellie's grumblings. Nazuna was, in a word, strong. She was slightly less resistant to magic than some, but all her other stats were off the charts. In fact, Nazuna was so powerful, if she were to fight Aoyuki and Ellie in a one-on-two battle, there was no telling who would come out on top. Yet, like Ellie said, Nazuna acted like the baby of the family. Everyone seemed to excuse her behavior with the phrase, "That's just Nazuna," and I had to admit, the fairy maids did tend to humor her a lot. Even Iceheat—who was a huge stickler for the rules—appeared to treat Nazuna with kid gloves. And of course, I had a soft spot for Nazuna too. As a result of how we treated Nazuna, she had ended up going way overboard not once but twice against

Hardy, and the damage had rebounded onto Ellie.

I absentmindedly started thinking what my four lieutenants would be like as actual sisters. *I guess Mei would be the responsible eldest sister, Aoyuki would be the cool and savvy second sister, Ellie's the gifted but perpetually persecuted middle child, while Nazuna is the excitable youngest sister.* This thought exercise was almost too fitting and I couldn't help smiling.

"Mrrreow?" Aoyuki mewed.

"Huh?" I said. "Oh, right. Our special guests are about to arrive."

I could sense these "special guests"—namely, Sasha and her fiancé, Mikhael—approaching the throne room as we spoke. They were taking a long time to get here because they'd been overly cautious while making progress through this floor, in case they set off any more traps. Even Ellie noticed the two elves were drawing closer, and she placed her senses on high alert.

"So they are," Ellie said. "I apologize, Blessed Lord Light. I shouldn't be complaining about Nazuna while we are engaged in this crucial operation."

"No, it's fine," I replied. "In fact, hearing your opinion on the matter was time well spent. But now, we have much more important business to attend to, so it's time we all focused."

"Of course, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said.

"Mroww!" Aoyuki mewed in assent.

"And Ellie," I added, "once Sasha and Mikhael enter this room and the door closes behind them, send a message to the other four fighters to be ready to transport the incapacitated bodies of the White Knights they battled up to this floor."

"As you wish, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie replied.

After relaying this final instruction, I put on my SSR Fool's Mask and my black hooded cloak, and grabbed my staff. A few minutes later, the door to the throne room slowly creaked open, and an elf woman with knifelike ears poking out of her long, flowing blonde hair appeared in the doorway. I was finally face-to-face with my nemesis as Light, the boy she had left for dead nearly three years prior.



On arriving at the destination the teleportation trap had whisked them away to, Sasha and Mikhael scanned their surroundings carefully, unsure of what to expect.

"How could Sharphat have missed such a large trap?" Mikhael grumbled.

"Are we still inside the tower, at least?" Sasha asked.

"I believe so," Mikhael replied. "The structures here seem to be made of the exact same material, in any case."

On the face of it, the trap had transported the two elves together because Mikhael had been holding Sasha close to him at the moment of teleport, though in reality, it wouldn't have made any difference if the two had been farther apart because Ellie had calibrated the trap to ensure the spouses-to-be would be sent to the same location.

Despite their predicament, both elves remained calm and alert, largely owing to the fact that Mikhael was the vice-commander of the White Knights, and Sasha had once belonged to the elite adventuring party, the Concord of the Tribes. From what they could see, they were in a long hallway that curved gently around to the right. There were no visible obstacles, and the hallway was wide enough for Sasha and Mikhael to stand side by side with their arms fully extended if they so wished. Although there were no doors or windows in what could be seen of the walls, there seemed to be magical light sources embedded in the ceiling that kept the space brightly illuminated.

"Well, there is little point in standing here forever," Mikhael muttered. "Let's move."

"I could scout ahead," Sasha suggested.

"No, Miss Sasha," Mikhael said firmly. "There may be more traps and monsters lurking unseen. Allow me to take the lead. My scouting skills may not be as good as Sharphat's, but I can manage well enough. Meanwhile, you should ready that phantasma-class weapon the count lent you."

"Yes, understood," said Sasha, completely swayed by Mikhael's counterproposal. She held aloft the weapon in question, which looked more like a white ocarina than an implement of war.

With the ocarina-like weapon in one hand, Sasha grabbed the back of Mikhael's cloak with the other to ensure they wouldn't get separated if they stumbled across another teleportation trap. The shield Mikhael was holding was also a phantasma-class weapon—one that he had borrowed from the chancellor—and the scene depicted on the front of it was of the Goddess blowing on a monster and making it roar in agony. The design was so detailed and ornate, it deserved to be called a work of art in its own right.

Mikhael drew his sword and tapped the floor cautiously with it to check for traps. "Miss Sasha, be sure to only place your feet where I have already stepped, and do not deviate for any reason."

"Of course, Sir Mikhael," Sasha obeyed.

Even though they were in what appeared to be an ordinary hallway, Sasha and Mikhael proceeded along it as if they were in some dark, forbidding dungeon. As it happened, there were no traps or monsters here at all, but the two elves had no way of knowing that. Ellie could naturally have teleported Sasha and Mikhael straight to the throne room, but she had instead decided to deposit them in the

hallway to mess with their heads one last time before their final encounter with Light. The hallway itself looked innocent enough at first glance, but it was long and on a deliberately blind curve, and after already tripping one teleportation trap, any experienced adventurer would be circumspect on finding themselves in this situation.

Unaware of the real intention of why they had ended up here, Mikhael and Sasha made their way carefully down the hallway, fully prepared to encounter some potentially fatal surprise. As a result of their unwarranted caution, the elves took an inordinate amount of time to reach the end of the hallway, but when they did get there, they found a set of double doors massive enough for a four-meter-tall golem to pass through without needing to stoop.

"It feels like we're about to face the final boss at the very end of a dungeon," Sasha said in a hushed tone.

"The 'boss' of this tower, so to speak," Mikhael whispered back. "Let us hope the boss is the Red Dragon so we can defeat it and leave this place." Mikhael gave a mirthful shrug, which made Sasha smile despite herself. But this moment of levity didn't last long.

"I suppose there is nowhere else to go but inside," Mikhael said, a serious expression appearing on his face once more.

"I am ready to play my ocarina whenever we need it, Sir Mikhael," Sasha said.

"If you sense we are in any danger, use it immediately," Mikhael instructed her.

Once this brief conversation had concluded, Mikhael put his hand on one of the doors and pushed gently, causing the double doors to swing open almost automatically, and so silently and smoothly that it was as if giant butlers were opening them from the other side.

Beyond the doors was a room that was significantly brighter than the hallway, as if the space was bathed in direct sunlight. Looking around the room, the two elves saw pillars arranged in orderly rows, though unlike on the first floor, the columns here were thinner. The room itself was about as big as a ballroom, with ceilings as high as the eye could see, and although there were no windows, it didn't feel like an enclosed space.

A red carpet led all the way up to a throne perched on top of a dais, though the room itself looked too plain and lacking in adornments to resemble a typical throne room. However, the two young women standing either side and slightly in front of the throne completely outshone the simplicity of the chamber. One was dressed in a witch's outfit, while the other—a petite blue-haired doll of a woman—was wearing a hood with cat ears. Both maidens were more breathtaking than any elf woman, and even if you spent all the money

in the world on hiring the very best architects, they wouldn't come close to designing a throne room with aesthetics that could exceed the radiance of these two ravishing beauties. The pair shone brighter than all the jewels in the Elven Queendom palace, yet Sasha's attention was instantly drawn to the human boy seated on the throne.

"Huh? What's that inferior doing here?!" Sasha bellowed.

"Miss Sasha?" Mikhael queried.

Even from afar, Sasha recognized the fool's mask, the dark robe, and the staff. This was the same boy she had mistaken for Light the day she had set off to scout the Great Mystery Tower. Because Sasha routinely dismissed all humans as inferiors, she instantly forgot the faces of most humans she met, but the memory of this particular kid was still seared into the back of her eyelids. Thinking he might be Light, Sasha had ordered the boy to remove his mask, but instead of finding the visage of her former partymate underneath, the boy revealed horrible burn scars that made her shriek and gag.

"Miss Sasha, do you know the boy sitting atop that throne?" Mikhael pressed.

"Well, no, I don't *know* him as such," said Sasha. "He was an adventurer I came across in the camptown before I departed on my quest to scout this tower."

The boy and the two young women could clearly see Sasha and Mikhael were at the door, but none of them moved a muscle. All three seemed to be waiting for the elves to enter the throne room. Sasha and Mikhael scanned the chamber, but save for the trio near the throne, there appeared to be nobody else in there. At the very least, there was nowhere a Red Dragon could be hiding out of sight.

"Let us enter, Miss Sasha," Mikhael suggested. "It seems we have no other option."

"Okay, Sir Mikhael," Sasha replied.

After taking a few tentative steps into the room, the door suddenly swung shut behind the elves, though this didn't spook the couple because they had anticipated that would happen. They inched their way into the room until the boy called out to them.

"It's been a while, Sasha."

Sasha shot the masked kid a quizzical look before launching into a breathless rant. "Yes, we haven't seen each other since my quest. But we don't know each other well enough for you to say that to me! In fact, I don't want to hear you say *anything* to me, you disgusting inferior!"

The two maidens looked incredibly annoyed by the vitriol in her voice, but even their irritated expressions didn't detract from their beauty. Mikhael found himself completely entranced by the two women, though luckily for him, Sasha was standing behind him, so

she was unable to see the dazzled look on his face.

The masked youth laughed scornfully at Sasha in a voice that sent chills down her spine. “That’s not very nice, Sasha. We used to go questing in dungeons in the same party, remember?”

“What?” Sasha sneered. “You must have me mixed up with some other elf. Why would I ever go questing with...” A note of hesitation entered her voice. “...with an inferior in the same party?”

Sasha’s usual self-assured haughtiness at the beginning of her reply had petered out toward the end as she put two and two together and recalled she had in fact done some questing with a human in the past: the human she’d attempted to assassinate while in the Concord of the Tribes. But the boy sitting in front of her couldn’t be Light because she’d seen his heavily scarred face firsthand. At the same time, Sasha had received a note from Light saying that he would be waiting for her at this tower, and she had risked life and limb to get here to confront him. If that message *was* indeed accurate, then it couldn’t be anyone *other* than Light sitting before her.

The boy placed his hand on his mask, and Sasha braced herself for the nauseating sight she expected to be revealed, but her curiosity got the better of her and she didn’t dare avert her gaze. In fact, Sasha was so fixated on the boy, she completely forgot that Mikhael, her fiancé—the very embodiment of the privileged future she wished to safeguard, and one of the last people she wanted finding out the truth—was also in the room. When the youth finally removed his mask, Sasha let out a hoarse, gut-wrenching scream.

The boy named Light smiled viciously at the elf woman, like a wolf about to devour its prey. “I’ll say it again: it’s been a while, Sasha. I’ve waited three long years for this, but I’m here to take my revenge!”



“H-How are you still *alive*?!” Sasha shrieked, shrinking away as she spoke. “You had all those horrible burn scars! A-And even though it’s been three years, you haven’t grown at all! You *can’t* be Light!” Sasha was almost whispering to herself by this point and she continued to stare at the boy like she’d seen a ghost. “I saw your face with my own eyes. You weren’t him...”

“Those scars were an illusion,” Light explained. “And I’ve stopped my body aging because I don’t want to forget the pain, misery, and anger I felt when you and the rest of the Concord of the Tribes betrayed me.” The palpable rage Light aimed at Sasha caused her to squeal in fright.

Mikhael stepped in front of Sasha to shield her from Light’s gaze, then turned his head to the side to address his fiancée. “Miss Sasha, is

what this boy is saying true?" he asked. "That would mean he is the potential Master that was supposed to be dead. Am I to gather that no assassination in fact took place?"

"Oh, I mean, well..." Sasha fumbled for the right answer to this question, but she herself had no clue how Light could have survived the horrors of the Abyss. But Light was the one to break the awkward silence between the two elves by filling in the blanks for them—though he certainly wasn't doing it as some kind of favor to Sasha.

"Yes, you did try to kill me three years ago in the Abyss, the largest and most notorious dungeon in the world," Light affirmed. "But luckily, I triggered a teleportation trap at the last minute and survived your assassination attempt. Now I'm here to take my revenge and find out why you all wanted to kill me. I'd also like to know what a Master actually is, and why the nations of this world were all out looking for one."

Light gestured to the two young ladies either side of his throne. "For that purpose, I've assembled allies like Aoyuki and Ellie here. I myself have powered up to Level 9999, and I've been busy collecting intelligence, spreading disinformation, and raising an army." Light grinned smugly and raised his hands toward the ceiling. "This entire tower was built just so I could serve up the sweetest revenge anyone could imagine on you!"

"Wh-Why would *anyone* build this thing just to get back at me?" Sasha stammered, her face going pale. "And did you say you're Level 9999 now? That's impossible. Tell me that's a joke..."

Sasha appeared thoroughly defeated mentally, but Light wasn't satisfied with simply seeing an anguished look on her face. His heart still smoldered with a red-hot desire to exact his vengeance. But at that moment, the tense mood in the room was broken by a peal of half-stifled chuckling.

"S-Sir Mikhael?" Sasha said, looking at her fiancé in confusion, since the *last* thing this dire situation called for was laughter.

Mikhael spun around and beamed broadly at Sasha. "Miss Sasha, you truly are the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. You are my very own Lady Luck," Mikhael declared. "Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that this prospective Master would survive his time in the Abyss, and that *we* would be the ones to end up killing him! And not only that, this boy is the one behind the Great Mystery Tower and the Red Dragon! If we take his head back to the queendom on a platter, we will gain untold influence! The daughter we sire will unquestionably be next in line to the throne!"

Sasha hadn't expected this kind of animated reaction from the normally rather even-keeled Mikhael, and she didn't find his prediction on how this would all play out particularly convincing

either. "But Light created this tower and tamed a Red Dragon. Plus, he just said his power level was 9999! There's no way we can kill him!"

"Miss Sasha, calm yourself." Mikhael brought his lips closer to Sasha's ear. "Yes, the tower is a shock to us all, but we do not know for sure that he made it himself. It was probably made by one of those two girls over there. Do you see the ears on that girl who looks like a witch? I think she is an elf."

Sasha took a good look at the girl named Ellie, who stood slightly in front and to the left of Light's throne. He was right: a couple of pointy ears *were* poking out from under her wide-brimmed witch's hat, which Sasha had failed to notice at first, since they were shorter than the ones you would find on a typical elf.

The likelihood of a successful pregnancy between two partners of different races was vanishingly remote compared to partners of the same race. On the rare occasion that a pregnancy of this kind was successful, the offspring generally shared the traits of one or other of the parents, but not both. For example, a child born to an elf and a human would exclusively inherit the physical characteristics and abilities of either the elf or the human, so for all practical purposes, there was no such thing as "mixed-race" in the normal sense of the term. As a side note, if a human child was born to a Master and an elf, they would be kept sheltered from the outside world and made to marry an elf when of age. This pattern repeated itself until only elves were born. There were exceptions to this, however, like the Submasters, who could trace their bloodlines directly back to human Masters. Mikhael believed Ellie was also a Submaster, which meant she could plausibly have the power it would require to create the tower they were in. Ellie's short but pointy ears were likely a deformity, and it stood to reason that the elves might have ostracized her due to her appearance. Mikhael theorized that Ellie now worked for Light because the human had shown her compassion when she was at her lowest emotionally.

"His claim that he is Level 9999 is obviously a bluff," Mikhael explained. "Think about it: there is no possible way that a mere inferior can be three times more powerful than the leader of the White Knights. He is being a typical child and exaggerating to make a point. You must not allow his theatrical threats to throw you off your stride."

"Yes..." Sasha said, considering the wisdom of this. "Yes, you must be right. Him being Level 9999 simply doesn't stack up."

"And he likely hasn't aged due to the psychological trauma of being betrayed by your party," Mikhael continued. "I admit it is not a common occurrence, but there are examples of it happening to others, according to a book I once read. A deep psychological wound can cause a body to refuse to develop, meaning the sufferer still looks the

same despite advancing in years. I believe this would explain his condition.”

“Now I understand...” Sasha said, steadily recovering from her initial defeatism, thanks to Mikhael’s levelheaded explanation. When Sasha had first received the message from Light, she hadn’t really believed in her heart of hearts that the boy was actually alive, but seeing the human in the flesh and looking exactly the same after three long years had shaken her to the core. Now, however, she thought Mikhael’s explanation made a lot of sense and chose to believe it.

Mikhael meanwhile had shifted his attention to the two maidens. *Were these girls the ones who rescued that boy? He looks quite young, and I will admit, he is as handsome as an elf, so it would only be natural for their motherly instincts to react strongly on learning of his miserable circumstances. I have heard that there are certain women who take a liking to boys who are young and vulnerable. Perhaps these girls also have a fetish for meek-looking males.*

It went without saying that if either Aoyuki or Ellie could have heard what Mikhael was thinking, they would have torn him limb from limb. The elf continued to explore the idea of a possible compromise based on this completely erroneous line of thinking. *These young ladies are likely the ones who created this tower. The queendom could use their as-yet-unexplained and mysterious capabilities, and I for one would not want them allying with another nation either. If they are into boys, we can always dangle Nhia and Khia in front of them as inducement to switch to our side.*

Mikhael was counting on a couple of better-looking elves being a stronger draw than some inferior boy. In fact, his entire line of thinking on the dynamic between Light, Aoyuki, and Ellie was based on his wrongheaded belief that humans were, without exception, lesser beings than elves. It was this poison that tainted the entirety of his “logic,” leading him to come to a very wrong conclusion.

Mikhael pulled away from Sasha’s ear and flashed his fiancée a winning smile. “You see? There is no reason to be afraid of this fake Master. Let us strike him down and seize the bright future that lies ahead of us with both hands.”

“Sir Mikhael...” Sasha breathed, briefly enraptured by his speech. “Yes, I am with you all the way! We will annihilate this undead cockroach once and for all!”

The two elves turned to face Light as if they were an adventuring party getting ready to take down a dark lord, their eyes ablaze with a mix of greed and a contrived sense of righteousness. Light had remained silent for the duration of their hushed exchange, but seeing that they were now done, he launched into his ultimatum in a way that was befitting of the designated villain of the scene.

“I only desire to take revenge on Sasha, the former member of the Concord of the Tribes,” Light said. “If you hand your fiancée over to me, Mikhael, I will spare your life. If you choose not to do so because you can’t stand the thought of abandoning the love of your life to be slaughtered by my hand, then all you will succeed in doing is offering your own life up for me to take along with hers. If that is your decision, I will reward the two of you with a painless death. So what will it be?”

Light even smiled wickedly like a dark lord and nonchalantly crossed his legs as he laid out these two unbearable options to Mikhael. The response of the two elves was to yell back at him in defiance, as if *they* were the heroes in this scenario.

“I choose neither! I will *never* give you my beloved Sasha!” Mikhael declared. “I shall destroy you and rescue the two girls you have ensnared, you revolting inferior!”

“You heard Sir Mikhael!” Sasha shouted. “This time, we will make sure you are sent straight to Hell! You could have been spared this fate if you had carried on crawling around in some dark corner with the rest of the vermin! How are you so stupid that you think you can seek revenge on *me*? Know your place, inferior! Now you will die knowing what a colossal imbecile you are!”

Mikhael wasn’t just prepared to protect Sasha; he had also declared that he would “rescue” Aoyuki and Ellie. Now free of the stress that had been building up inside her ever since she’d received that note from Light, Sasha was intoxicated with elation at this golden opportunity to kill her most-hated adversary. Meanwhile, Light simply grinned at the two elves in satisfaction, since they had given him the best ending to his revenge plot that he could have hoped for. Both Sasha and Mikhael had just chosen to throw their lives away.

“In that case, there’s nothing else to be said,” Light summed up. “All that’s left now is for me to take my revenge.”

Light arose from the throne to begin his second act of retribution, after previously getting his revenge on Garou. Sasha and Mikhael stood ready for battle and prepared for anything.

Chapter 15: Path to Despair

“Aoyuki. Ellie. Do not interfere under any circumstance,” I said to my two lieutenants as I rose from my throne.

“Mreeow!” replied Aoyuki.

“Understood, Blessed Lord Light,” said Ellie.

I sent the Fool’s Mask I’d removed from my face to my Item Box, and descended the stairs leading down from the dais with my trusty staff in hand. “Now, I’ll take my revenge.”

Mikhael—the vice-commander of the White Knights—stood with his shield raised in front of him, while behind him was the target of my revenge, Sasha, who was holding a white ocarina in her hands. Yet I casually strolled toward them, paying no heed to the items they were wielding.

“We will destroy you with our love, you filthy inferior!” Sasha yelled. She brought the ocarina up to her lips and musical notes filled the air.

A hallucination attack? I thought. Or maybe the sound is intended to mess with my mind?

It turned out I was wrong on both counts. A large magical symbol appeared on the floor underneath where she was standing, followed by three more magical symbols that appeared around the circumference of the first. Humanoid figures with wings on their backs—angels, to be exact—emerged from the three smaller symbols.

The first angel was more than four meters tall, had muscles on top of muscles, and wielded a spiked mace. The angel was shirtless but wore an armet, meaning I couldn’t see its facial expression. If this thing hadn’t had wings, I would’ve mistaken it for a regular monster.

The second angel was also around four meters tall, but this one resembled a golem with wings and didn’t seem to have any movable arms or legs, since its entire body looked like it had been carved out of a block of marble. In its hands, the angel held a staff which also appeared to be embedded in its body. In other words, the angel looked more like an elaborate chess piece than an actual living creature.

The final angel was wearing thick full-body armor and wielded a giant shield. Like the other angels, it was also four meters tall, and from the looks of it, this one was the protector of the group. Out of the three of them, this one looked the most like the usual image of an angel.

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The three angels seemed to be speaking in a language that was completely unintelligible. Standing behind the summoned creatures, Sasha started boasting triumphantly. “Witness the might of the Angel Ocarina, the phantasma-class weapon given to me by the count!” she yelled. “These divine angels will crush you like the cockroach you are!”

It looked as if the Angel Ocarina not only summoned angels, but sent them directly into battle. On Sasha’s cue, the three angels rushed forward to attack me, hurtling through the air without their wings even moving. The musclebound angel was the first to reach me, its velocity far superior to the other two, and as soon as it was within striking distance, it swung its spiked mace at my head.

“%\$HSPSM*!” it garbled.

“Whoa!” I blurted out as I dodged the mace in the nick of time.

It appeared the angel had been expecting splintered bits of floor to fly up toward me when the mace struck it with excessive force, because it seemed extremely confused when this didn’t happen. In fact, the mace failed to even make a dent in the floor, let alone cause it to fissure. “+ ~ ~ \$%#?! ” it babbled.

It looked as if the force of the impact from the mace striking the unexpectedly solid floor had caused the angel’s arm to go numb with pain. Ellie had made the fifth-floor throne room out of stronger material than the other four tiers, though I didn’t know her reasoning for this.

“You should’ve kept moving!” I shouted as I swung my staff toward what I was dubbing the Muscle Angel.

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The Shield Angel immediately placed itself between me and its comrade to protect it from my attack, with multiple layers of power barriers made of light appearing directly in front of it. I thought nothing of this development, however, and decided to take on both angels at once. My staff easily scythed through the power barriers and connected with the angel’s huge solid shield.

“Here’s my first hit!” I said triumphantly.

My staff shattered the shield as well as both of the Shield Angel’s arms, and it did so with such ease that my momentum wasn’t slowed at all, the resulting blow sending the two angels hurtling backward all the way to the opposite wall. The angel pair were still standing, however, because I hadn’t used my full strength, and the power shields had absorbed at least some of the force of the attack.

The statue-like angel started chanting something in the weird

angel language it spoke. “|(&%-\$* + PL!” it said.

“It’s healing them?” While I was speaking, the Statue Angel restored the Shield Angel’s arms and shield back to their original forms. This confirmed to me that the Statue Angel was the mage of the group, and likely projected the power barriers too. *They look like they’re all around Level 1500, I thought. So I’m up against the Muscle Angel that performs physical attacks, the Shield Angel capable of physical protection, and the Statue Angel who’s the mage. You don’t see this combo every day. If these angels can restore themselves that quickly, maybe they should try these on for size!*

Ignoring the angels for the time being, I turned toward Sasha. “Dust Press! Shadow Dance—release!” I yelled.

I activated the SSR Dust Press card, which produced a concentrated wind attack to sweep away the angels, and to make doubly sure that the angels wouldn’t interfere in my confrontation with Sasha, I activated the SSR Shadow Dance card, which produced dark bands that extended from the angels’ shadows and wrapped around the summons to immobilize them, though only for a limited time.

Sasha looked shocked that it had only taken me a few seconds to incapacitate the angels. “How can an inferior like you cast two unvoiced combat magic spells?!”

I didn’t answer, but flung myself forward instead, swinging my staff to floor her.

“Keep your filthy hands off my fiancée, inferior boy!” Mikhael shouted as he immediately positioned himself in front of Sasha with his shield raised.

“As if I’d *want* to put my hands on her. Anyway, it’ll be my staff touching her, not my hands!” I shouted at him. “And you really think you’re gonna shield her from *this* attack—Wait, what the...”

While in the middle of my retort, I’d found myself blown backward by some mysterious force. I managed to regain my balance in midair and land on my feet, though I still skidded backward for quite some distance, the resulting friction kicking up wisps of smoke.

“Did he bash me with his shield?” I wondered aloud. “I didn’t see him move his arms or body. But it didn’t feel like a magical attack...”

“Shocked, are we?” Mikhael taunted. “That will be because the entire force of your attack was repelled against you.” Mikhael grinned and waved his shield at me proudly. “The chancellor was kind enough to give me this phantasma-class shield, known as the Blessing and Retribution, which doles out divine punishment upon those who defy Heaven. And what’s more...” At this point in the elf’s explanation, the shield started to glow, and the same light enveloped Mikhael, Sasha, and the three angels. “This weapon can raise the stats of the wielder

and all of his allies. Let's see how well you fare against buffed angels, inferior!"

Sasha giggled loudly. "And those angels will keep attacking and regenerating themselves until I tell them to stop! Plus, even if you *do* completely defeat them, I can just summon more angels to fight you! And that's not the only trick I have up my sleeve!"

If Sasha wasn't bluffing, the Angel Ocarina was more powerful than I had initially thought, and I found myself wondering what else it might be capable of. I guess it wasn't phantasma-class for nothing.

"If you try to attack me, Sir Mikhael will always be there to protect me!" Sasha declared, standing behind her fiancé. "And if you attempt to take out Sir Mikhael first, his Blessing and Retribution will turn all of your attacks against you!" By this point, Sasha had worked herself up into a half-crazed triumphant tirade. "So tell me: are you going to start crying again, you little inferior turd?! This is what you get for challenging your elf superiors! Now there is no hope of you escaping your demise! How does it feel to be crushed under our heels, you wretched gob of slug-shit?!"

Mikhael chuckled wryly at Sasha's profanity-laced diatribe, shrugging off her rather colorful language. "I shall not repeat what Miss Sasha just said, but you should have accepted that you are our lesser, inferior. You and your species may be too feeble-minded and of low intelligence to understand this, but you lost the minute you decided to challenge us. There was no chance of you defeating us."

Both Sasha and Mikhael were acting like they had already won the fight. The White Knight allowed a friendly smile—or rather, a patronizing one—to spread across his face before continuing. "It will be impossible for an inferior boy like you to prevail against our combined might," Mikhael said. "If you surrender to us now, we will—to borrow your words—reward you with a quick and painless death. In all honesty, I would rather not have to force those girls to watch an inferior suffer a cruel and excruciating death."

"Hm? Why are you mentioning Aoyuki and Ellie?" I questioned. I really didn't get what Mikhael was trying to imply, so I figured I'd ask him directly.

The elf sighed in annoyance before replying. "Goddess, give me strength. Conversing with you slow-witted cretins is so exhausting," Mikhael said. "Look, it is obvious you have tricked those young ladies into serving you, and it is my duty as a White Knight to rescue them from your evil grasp. I honestly cannot believe I need to walk you inferiors through such a simple concept."

Despite what he said, Mikhael hadn't actually walked me through anything, because I was still confused by his meaning. I tilted my head to one side in puzzlement and frowned at the elf. Aoyuki and Ellie

meanwhile were trying their best to restrain themselves after listening to Sasha and Mikhael disparage me the way they had since the battle began. They definitely weren't going to go with the elves quietly if it did come to that, which seemed highly unlikely. I seriously had to wonder where Mikhael was getting his confidence from. But then he went one step further and touched a particularly sensitive nerve that only succeeded in setting me off.

"You will never escape from this hopeless situation," Mikhael declared. "The only way to end your despair is to present your head to us."

"Despair?" I said. This elf really thought I'd feel any sort of despair while standing where I was now, and after everything I'd been through.

I chuckled at first but it soon turned into a torrent of maniacal laughter. I'd completely lost control. How could anyone describe what I was feeling at that moment as "despair"? I couldn't help but laugh my head off. These pampered dopes were trying to talk to *me* about despair? How could I not laugh at that?

"H-He's creeping me out," said Sasha.

"He is in the midst of a mental breakdown due to the desperate nature of the situation he finds himself in," Mikhael explained matter-of-factly. "It happens rather frequently."

Exactly how many times had Mikhael driven his foes to insanity in battle due to the hopelessness of their situation? Once I'd laughed myself out, I turned to the two elves and grinned wickedly from ear to ear. My smile wasn't quite as wide as Mera was capable of, but it came pretty close. "I must thank the two of you for giving me the best laugh I've had in a long while," I said. "And to show my gratitude, I'll let you find out what despair *really* looks like!"

I tightened my grip on my staff, which immediately alarmed Aoyuki and Ellie enough for them to speak up for the first time since the start of the fight.

"Mrrrow!" Aoyuki screeched.

"B-Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie cried.

"Commencing primary Soul Seal cancel code: 9999, four nines!" I yelled. "God Requiem Gungnir!"

This command removed one of the magical seals from the EX God Requiem Gungnir, the weapon I was holding that looked like a simple staff any sorcerer might use, but was in reality a genesis-class spear that had once been wielded by a deity. It was the only EX item my Unlimited Gacha had produced in the past three years, and in all honesty, I didn't actually know the full extent of the Gungnir's powers. When I'd used my Gift of Appraisal on the weapon, it had only had "A spear__a__god" as its main description, with the rest of the words

totally obscured. What I *did* know about the Gungnir was that it was so powerful, Mei, Ellie, Aoyuki, and I had needed to place magical soul-shackling seals on the weapon in order to contain its energy. Of course, it went without saying that it was the Forbidden Witch, Ellie, who came up with the spell to do so.

And so the four of us had jointly sealed the Gungnir's true powers away using our Level 9999 abilities, nerfing it so much that the spear turned into a rather plain-looking sorcerer's staff. Or to put it in another way, the Gungnir was so powerful, it had taken four Level 9999 people to make sure its devastating power was contained so it could be used safely. In uttering the cancel code, I had just removed a quarter of the seals that had been suppressing its power. This had an immediate effect visually, with a dusk-colored flame rising from the Gungnir as it transformed and sprouted a dark blade at the end. Smoke rose from the place I was gripping the spear, and there was a hissing sound as the weapon burned in my hand. Though perhaps "burn" was the wrong word. I guess it would be more accurate to say the Gungnir's unsealed magical energy ate away at my flesh. I was able to limit the damage by pouring defense stats into my right hand.

The intense waves of energy exuding from the newly upgraded Gungnir stunned Mikhael and Sasha into awed silence as they were shown just how misguided their display of sneering bravado mere minutes before had been. They looked as if they were gazing upon a powerful behemoth lurking in the night's shadows. The two elves instinctively stayed silent, as if they feared just one sound out of them might provoke the beast.

I thrust the Gungnir toward them to signal that I was ready to battle, the evil grin on my face stretching from one earlobe to the other. "Now, as promised, I will show you what *real* despair looks like!"

"A-Angels, kill that ghastly freak this instant!" Sasha yelled at her summons. It seemed she wasn't just scared; she felt her life was in real danger. The effects of Shadow Dance wore off, allowing the Muscle Angel and the Shield Angel to rush toward me once more.

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The Shield Angel came flying in and tried to crush me with its giant shield. Faced with this, any regular adventurer would probably have darted away to a safer location, but I stayed rooted to the spot and lazily swung the God Requiem Gungnir. When the spear connected, there was absolutely no resistance, as if it was slicing through air, yet the four-meter-tall Shield Angel was cut clean in two—armor, shield, and all. The two broken halves careened past me and crashed lifelessly to the floor.

The Muscle Angel—which had been using the Shield Angel as cover—reached me next, swinging its mace, but I stood my ground and effortlessly met the attack with my Gungnir. If the normal laws of physics had applied in this situation, the impact of the mace should have been enough to break a spear like the Gungnir in half, but instead of a clash of metal on metal, the moment the mace came into contact with the Gungnir, the giant spiked weapon melted in the angel's hands. It was almost as if the mace was sugar candy dissolving soundlessly in water.

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Even though I didn't understand angel-speak, the Muscle Angel was quite clearly stupefied at what had just happened to its mace. I raised my Gungnir to strike the Muscle Angel again, but the Statue Angel intervened by generating another power barrier around its comrade to block my attack. This barrier turned out to be even more useless than the previous one, however—if that were actually possible—and the Gungnir struck the Muscle Angel before it had a chance to run and hide, leaving behind a gaping gash across its body.

Sasha shrieked with fright. “R-Restore that angel!” she ordered. “Hurry, before it—”

Sasha had been urging the Statue Angel to perform its duties, but it was too late. The Gungnir enveloped the Muscle Angel in black flame as if lighting a piece of paper on fire. In the blink of an eye, the dark smoke and flames completely devoured the Muscle Angel, leaving no trace of it behind. Just a single hit from my spear had destroyed not one, but two angels. This completely one-sided battle left Sasha open-mouthed and speechless.

“Miss Sasha!” cried Mikhael, who was drenched in cold sweat. “Move the last angel forward to buy us some time! Then use those precious seconds to summon the angels again! Hurry!”

“Uh, yes, right, Sir Mikhael!” Sasha said. She put the Angel Ocarina to her lips again and resurrected both the Shield Angel and the Muscle Angel.

“So you really can bring them straight back with that thing, huh?” I mused aloud. “That's a fascinating item you have.”

I stood back and watched as Sasha revived the angels I'd just destroyed, in no hurry to attack them again. While I was serenely calm, Sasha and Mikhael looked maddened and frantic.

“Miss Sasha, use your final trick,” Mikhael instructed. “This inferior is one thing, but he is holding a very dangerous weapon that can utterly destroy an angel in an instant!”

“Whatever you say, Sir Mikhael!” Sasha obeyed.

Mikhael moved across to protect her with his Blessing and Retribution shield even though I wasn't giving off any indication that I

was about to attack her. My plan was to let the two elves throw everything they had at me, and *then* crush them to show how pitiful their efforts to defeat me had been. That way, they would be drowning in hopeless despair when it finally came time to kill them.

“Combine into one flesh, my angels!” Sasha yelled before blowing on the ocarina again. This time, the tune she played was different from the one she had used to summon the beings.

In response to the music, the Shield Angel, the Muscle Angel, and the Statue Angel moved toward one another and converged in a blinding flash of light. When the light eventually subsided, the three angels had been replaced by a single fused angel. This angel wasn’t any bigger than the other three had been, but it did have three pairs of wings on its back. As for weaponry, it carried the same giant shield that the Shield Angel had wielded in one hand, and in the other, it held what looked to be some kind of mace and holy staff hybrid. This being looked truly divine—not to mention, mighty and imposing.

“Archangel! Punish this damn inferior for getting in the way of my and Sir Mikhael’s happiness!” yelled Sasha. “Unleash your Holy Javelin tactical magic attack!”

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The three angels-turned-Archangel vocalized a completely unintelligible incantation that unleashed the most powerful attack in their arsenal. The next thing I knew, a large energy beam as thick as a pillar had formed above my head and it wasn’t long before the beam was hurtling down toward me full-force. The resultant blinding explosion of light removed all visible trace of me.

Sasha cackled in demented ecstasy. “Take that, you filthy human! Taste the righteous fury of the Holy Javelin! Even if you had been resistant to divine attacks, a direct hit like that wouldn’t leave a single piece of bone behind to remember you by!”

Sasha took a moment to catch her breath before continuing her rant. “You shitbag inferior. You actually made us sweat a little there, and by all rights, you should have paid dearly for that. A quick death by Holy Javelin is more than your miserable kind deserves. I really hate that I couldn’t make you suffer *more*, but on the other hand, we used to quest in dungeons together, so consider it a final act of mercy from a former partymate!”

“I can hardly believe how powerful that Angel Ocarina is,” Mikhael uttered. “We owe the count a great deal for bestowing that lifesaving weapon upon you.”

“We really do, Sir Mikhael!” Sasha agreed. “But I don’t care if we owe him everything, as long as that stinking inferior is out of the way —”

“Sasha, did you really think that beam would be enough to kill

me?"

The petrified faces of Sasha and Mikhael said it all as they stared at me disbelievingly after I'd interrupted their little victory lap. I had emerged from that energy blast completely unscathed because the black flame from my Gungnir had vaporized the beam before it could even get to me. And now that all that was over and done with, I started plodding toward the two elves with dark flame and smoke floating around my right arm.

"H-How are you still *alive*?!" Sasha screamed. "Archangel! Atomize that kid!"

"&#~\$! > M <!"

Another Holy Javelin shot down toward the top of my head, but I simply released more of the Gungnir's dark flame that I had been suppressing in response. Sasha may have called the Holy Javelin a "divine" form of tactical magic, but for one thing, my power level was much higher, and for another, the holy beam disintegrated as soon as it came into contact with the Gungnir's dark, flame-like energy, so none of the blast was able to reach me, anyway.

Sasha and Mikhael stared at me goggle-eyed, like they were looking at something out of a nightmare. I didn't blame them for that, since I was calmly deflecting what appeared to be a powerful attack that would have instantly obliterated both of them had our situations been reversed. But the two elves looked so ridiculously shocked, I couldn't help a giggle rising up from the pit of my stomach and filling the air as I sauntered toward them.

"Aren't you guys gonna attack me again?" I taunted them, the Gungnir's dark flames still hovering around me. "Well, in that case, I guess it's my turn!"

"S-Stay away from me, you monster!" Sasha yelled, fear twisting her face hideously. "Archangel!"

"& = &\$~ > > M%W!"

This time, the Archangel tried hitting me with an untold number of bolts of light, but a quick wave of the Gungnir made the dark flame billow outward, canceling them all out as they rained down toward me. While my foes had a pure-white angel with six wings on their side, I was like a dark angel with one large wing sprouting from my back.

"Why isn't the Archangel killing him?!" Sasha shrieked. "Its attacks *must* work! Please work! Please! For the love of everything!"

Sasha had resorted to praying that these divine attacks would have some kind of effect on me, but her prayers went unanswered. To be honest, if I was hurt anywhere as a result of these attacks, it was my right hand, since releasing more of the dark flames and smoke from the Gungnir was causing the weapon to eat away at my skin with

a loud hissing sound. Yes, I was pretty much injuring myself by just standing there and soaking up these attacks, but whatever pain I was feeling was well worth it, since I was enjoying Sasha's screams of deranged terror.

I threw my head back and laughed. "Oh, come on, Sasha! You've gotta try harder than that if you wanna kill me! Do you really think what you're doing now is enough?" I roared with evil laughter again, and it was around this point that the Archangel realized it couldn't defeat me unless it changed things up.

"&)%~\$] + L{K < *!"

This time, the Archangel rained down another Holy Javelin in between firing a crapload more of those bolts of light, and at the same time, it generated dozens of power shields in front of itself and hurtled straight toward me. Was the Archangel capable of doing all of these things at once because it was actually three angels in one?

"That thing's pretty adaptable," I said, impressed. "But that's all I can say for it."

The black flame from the Gungnir canceled out all of the light-based attacks, while the blade at the top of my weapon ripped through the multiple power barriers like they were wet paper. In the same swing, the Gungnir sliced through the Archangel from head to toe—giant shield and all—and a few more quick slashes with the Gungnir saw the holy being diced into a thousand pieces. Now that it was utterly destroyed, what remained of the Archangel disintegrated into particles and disappeared completely.

Mikhael raised his Blessing and Retribution shield to protect Sasha before turning to her and frantically shrieking, "Miss Sasha! Restore the angels!"

"I can't!" Sasha cried after blowing into the Angel Ocarina several times. "They aren't coming back, no matter how many times I try to summon them! What's going on? This isn't supposed to happen!"

All of a sudden, the milky-white ocarina turned ink-black and crumbled in Sasha's hands.

"What? But why?!" Sasha yelled in dismay. "How is this happening? I didn't even do anything to it!"

"You have the God Requiem Gungnir to thank for that," I explained. "This spear really does bury gods, and angels are as near to gods as you can get. Though I will admit that I didn't know releasing its powers would vaporize those angels and make you unable to summon them again."

Mikhael—who had completely lost his cool by this point—stammered in shock at this information. "Th-That thing destroyed a *phantasma-class* weapon? What kind of spear is that? But never mind that—are you *really* a human? Are you sure you are not a mutated

elf?"

"A mutated elf?" I repeated. "Don't be so ridiculous. I'm a human through and through. And besides, the God Requiem Gungnir is a genesis-class weapon, which means no phantasma-class weapon could've stood up to it."

"I-Is that supposed to be a joke?" Mikhael said, tittering derisively. "If it is, I do not find it funny. First, you purport to be Level 9999, and now, you say you are armed with a genesis-class weapon? That is two tiers above our phantasma-class weapons, and those are normally considered national treasures! You will cease with these attempts to bamboozle us, you wretched inferior!"

Mikhael was sweating buckets by this point, refusing to believe what he could see with his own eyes. The only things keeping him from completely losing hope were his pride as an elf and the knowledge that he still had his shield, the Blessing and Retribution.

"B-By sheer coincidence, you just happened to have a weapon that could counter the Angel Ocarina, yet you try to make us believe it is a genesis-class weapon?" Mikhael said accusingly, his voice high-pitched and shrill. "You may think you have won this battle, but I still have my shield! As long as I have this, we will still prevail! I can repel each and every one of your attacks!"

"Well, in that case, I'll just have to destroy that shield like I did the ocarina," I said.

Mikhael gripped the handle of his Blessing and Retribution for dear life and raised it in front of him. "Then, come! No lowly inferior can defeat an elf!"

I lunged forward and swung the Gungnir toward the elf. Seemingly matching my timing, Mikhael thrust his shield forward to meet me, while Sasha took cover behind him.

"Dirty inferior!" Mikhael yelled. "Now you will meet your end by your own attack! Retribution!"

The God Requiem Gungnir struck the Blessing and Retribution full-on just as Mikhael was praying in his heart of hearts for a miracle. Unfortunately for him, his pleas would go unanswered.

"What?" he spluttered in shock. "My shield!"

The Blessing and Retribution shattered like brittle glass under the force of the Gungnir. The blow sent Mikhael and Sasha flying backward through the air screaming before landing heavily on the extra-hard throne room floor. Due to Ellie's spell, I knew there was little chance of me accidentally killing the couple, so I'd gone hog wild with my attack.

Sasha and Mikhael lay flat out on the floor groaning, now divested of their phantasma-class weapons. They were still conscious and had looks of abject shock etched on their faces, but they didn't seem to

have been overtaken by despair—Mikhael especially, since I could detect a faint glimmer of hope in his eyes. I took this to mean he still had one more trump card up his sleeve.

Mikhael managed to haul himself up to his knees, though he slowly shrank away from me and edged closer to Sasha. “It seems you were able to destroy the Blessing and Retribution after all,” Mikhael said, chuckling nervously. “I never anticipated running into a human as *unnatural* as yourself. Are you *certain* you are not a Master?”

“Several countries banded together to answer that and decided I *wasn’t* a Master, then tried to have me bumped off,” I replied dryly. “Are you suggesting you guys were actually wrong?”

Mikhael sighed. “Honestly, I do not understand why they did not make absolutely sure that such a dangerous threat was removed permanently. If they had simply done their duty, we would not be in this mess. This was a huge blunder on the part of you and your team, Miss Sasha.”

Still on his knees, Mikhael moved even closer to Sasha, giving me the distinct impression that he was planning to do something once he reached her. Despite the completely hopeless situation Mikhael was in, it seemed as if he really did have something up his sleeve. But instead of stopping him, I just watched on as Mikhael maneuvered himself farther away from me. *I have a pretty good idea what he’s up to, anyway*, I thought to myself.

When he was close enough to her, Mikhael grabbed Sasha’s hand and pulled a card out of his breast pocket. The card had magical seals and a whole bunch of spells written on it, as well as a drawing of a pair of wings that seemed to belong to an unseen angel or bird.

“I have a duty to report someone as dangerous as you,” Mikhael informed me with a smirk. “I shall return to the queendom and convince my superiors to establish a coalition of nations to eliminate you as a threat. Until that day comes, I shall take my leave of you. Magic Item: Skyrunner Wings!”

Mikhael’s card went up in flames and a bright glow enveloped him and Sasha, but after that, nothing happened. Mikhael’s cockiness instantly drained away and he was left looking downright disturbed.

“What? But *why?*!” Mikhael yelled on finding himself still sitting on the throne room floor with Sasha. “That magic item has been passed down in my family for generations! It came from a Master, no less! It was supposed to teleport us far away from here! I cannot imagine it being switched out for a fake, so why have we not teleported?!”

As I’d suspected, Mikhael had been planning to use some kind of teleportation item. *He could’ve easily tried to escape on his own, but I’m willing to bet he wanted to take Sasha with him so she could take the fall*

for everything that's happened, I thought.

"We went through all that trouble creating this Great Tower, and even summoned a dragon to lure you guys here," I said to Mikhael, my gaze turning inadvertently frosty. "It should've been obvious to you that we would make this tower teleportation-proof so you guys couldn't escape."

"What insanity is this?!" Mikhael cried out. "No magic exists that can cancel a teleportation spell! Y-You lie!"

"Well, yes, it's true that no magic spell exists on the surface world that can jam long-distance teleportation magic," I conceded. "If you want to see teleportation jamming in action, you usually have to go to one of the very small number of dungeons where it's a thing. But then, no one on the surface world has developed a jamming spell because no one in the world is even *capable* of teleportation magic, and teleportation items are exceedingly rare. So it stands to reason that if no jamming spell exists, you just have to invent one. Isn't that right, Ellie?"

"You are absolutely right, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie replied giddily. "All you have to do is create the spell yourself!"

As was obvious from this exchange, Ellie had been the one who had come up with the teleportation-canceling magic. The superwitch boastfully puffed out her well-developed chest.

"The cancellation spell was an original creation of mine that was made possible by my analysis of the Abyss's dungeon core," Ellie began. "The Abyss gave me an awful lot of trouble, since it kept obstructing all teleportation magic."

The Forbidden Witch, Ellie, who was an expert on all things magic, had needed about a year to analyze the Abyss's dungeon core so that she could nullify the teleportation jamming. She had then gone on to repurpose the Abyss's jamming magic for one of her own spells.

"So there you have it," I said. "You can't teleport out of here. Got any more bright ideas?"

Mikhael choked down a grunt of frustration. Sasha turned to him with grim worry etched on her face. "S-Sir Mikhael?"

Since that little rant where Sasha and Mikhael had called me every name under the sun, I had powderized their Angel Ocarina, obliterated their Blessing and Retribution shield, and rendered their teleportation card useless. The two elves glared bitterly at me from their seated positions, but didn't move a muscle. This tipped me off that they had no other backup plans.

"N-No, there is still hope!" Mikhael suddenly cried out defiantly. "Hardy will come save us! My commander is Level 3000, and he will kill all of you in a heartbeat! But I am still willing to spare you people if you cooperate! I may even find it within myself not to report your

presence to the queendom. But only if you let us go! So release us now!”

Mikhael was now pinning his hopes on being bailed out by the other White Knights, in the belief that nothing could defeat their ultimate warrior, Hardy the Silent. It went without saying that I’d have to shatter this pipe dream of his, so I called up the rest of my team using the SR Telepathy card. This particular gacha card allowed you to convey messages to someone using only your thoughts, but if you wanted, you could say the message out loud and the effect was more or less the same—and that was exactly what I did, because I wanted Mikhael to hear everything.

“Iceheat, if everyone’s done with their battles, you can come in now,” I said.

Understood, Master Light, Iceheat replied telepathically.

“Huh? What did you just say?” Sasha asked. She must have thought I was speaking to myself, which wasn’t all that surprising since third parties couldn’t hear telepathic conversations.

I ignored Sasha and focused my attention on the throne room doors as they swung open slowly. My five fighters strolled in dragging the other members of the White Knights, who were all out cold.

“Sir Hardy! Sir Sharphat! Sir Muste!” cried Sasha.

“Those burnt bodies...” Mikhael gasped. “Is that Nhia and Khia?!” He looked stupefied. “You defeated *everyone*?!”

I’d instructed Ellie to tell my fighters to come up to the fifth floor once they were done with their fights and wait outside the throne room door until I gave the word for them to enter. Iceheat led the group into the throne room, followed by Mera—who was holding Nhia and Khia aloft with her tentacles—and with Suzu and Jack close behind, who were hauling in Sharphat and Muste respectively, the two elves’ faces horribly disfigured. Nazuna brought up the rear, dragging Hardy across the floor by his collar. Hardy’s heavy armor was beyond repair and his eyes had rolled back into his skull. My fighters let their victims fall to the floor in front of Sasha and Mikhael, and both of them yelped in fright at the sight. Ignoring the reaction of the two elves, each of my warriors dropped to one knee before me.

“Master Light, forgive us for our late arrival,” Iceheat said, speaking for the group.

“You weren’t late at all,” I said. “In fact, you all got here just in time. Now, raise your heads and stand.”

“Thank you very much, Master Light!” Iceheat replied as she rose along with the four other fighters in a way that was so synchronized, you’d think they had rehearsed this exact motion hundreds of times.

Surrounded by my comrades, I looked down with contempt at Sasha and Mikhael, who were still kneeling on the floor. “Your allies

were your last hope, but here they are, utterly defeated. Do you have any more options or are you all out now?"

Sasha shrieked, while Mikhael simply shook with desperate indignation. His face scrunched up as he racked his brain to figure out some way he could save himself from this hopeless situation. Then in a flash, Mikhael's expression brightened as his visage morphed into that of a shameless flatterer.

"Such magnificent power..." Mikhael fawned, prostrating himself in front of me. "Never would I have imagined that I would meet a human as powerful as you. I have a proposition for you: let us join forces and take over the Elven Queendom."

This sudden change in her fiancé's attitude took Sasha completely by surprise. "S-Sir Mikhael?" she stammered.

"I am the vice-commander of the White Knights, the highest order of knights in the queendom," Mikhael continued, ignoring Sasha. "Unlike Hardy, who has stupidly allowed himself to be rendered comatose, I am well versed in political machinations as I am a member of the royal family, as well as being friendly with the chancellor. I assure you, I am highly qualified to be useful to you as your ally!"

I looked down at Mikhael, but maintained my silence. Beads of cold sweat began to pepper the elf's brow again as he continued to plead his case. "You are so *incredibly* powerful, my lord!" Mikhael said from his prone position. "If that power were to be applied correctly, we could take control of the queendom! Just leave everything to me, and we will have you sitting on the queendom's throne before you know it! And once you are there, you can have your pick of elf women!"

Looks like he still can't let go of his prejudice against humans, I thought. Even when Mikhael was *literally* begging for his life, he still thought all humans could be bought off by simply dangling the chance to sleep with elves in front of them. This total bigotry this race displayed toward my own was really getting old.

"Don't make me repeat what I've already told you," I said, finally breaking my silence and filling the air with wrathful energy that made Mikhael and Sasha gulp in fear. "Three years ago, I was almost murdered in the Abyss," I said. "Luckily, I survived that ordeal, and now I'm here to take revenge on my former partymates. I also want to know *why* I was set up, what exactly a Master even is, and why whole nations are seeking one. I have survived for all of these years so that I can find out the answers to these questions, yet you think offering me the Elven Queendom instead will be enough to satisfy me?"

Still on their hands and knees, Mikhael and Sasha trembled with fear under the intensity of my ice-cold gaze.

"I'm here to battle the nations of the world in order to exact my revenge and find out the truth," I said. "I don't give a damn about ruling the Elven Queendom!"

"If that is true, then your quarrel is not with me!" Mikhael yelled, and he shuffled away from Sasha so fast, his glasses almost unhooked themselves from his ears. "I'm not the one you are after, so please set *me* free!"

"Sir Mikhael?" Sasha cried out in shock.

Mikhael again kowtowed to me to beg for his release. "I was not the one who tried to kill you three years ago! It was the Elven Queendom that handed down that assassination order. I may be the vice-commander of the White Knights, but I was in no way involved in the decision-making process! I implore you: please understand that I had nothing to do with your traumatic ordeal and that I am a complete outsider in all of this!"

"But Sir Mikhael, you are *very much* a part of this!" Sasha wailed as she stretched her arms out toward her fiancé. "You're my soulmate! You promised me we would have a life together!"

"Do not touch me, you ugly, repulsive woman!" Mikhael snapped, swatting Sasha's hands away as if they were covered in dirt before turning to me again. "I was ordered to marry her for political reasons! I did not want to marry this bastard daughter of a common wench at all! Every time this harlot touches me, I shudder with revulsion!"

"How could you?!" Sasha cried. "You said you loved me!"

"I was obviously feeding you a pack of lies!" Mikhael sneered. "You made him this vindictive, so he is well within his rights to slay you, but keep *me* out of it!"

With his life on the line, Mikhael was clearly trying to make sure his fiancée took the fall in order to save his own skin, which naturally led the two former lovebirds to engage in a cringe-inducing fight at floor level.

"I swear I do not harbor any feelings for this woman!" Mikhael pleaded with me. "In fact, as of this moment, I am not even in a relationship with her! She is a perfect stranger to me! If you doubt my words, I can kill this wretched woman for you!"

"Go to hell!" Sasha screamed at him, unable to hold back her tears any longer. "You backstabber! Backstabber! Backstabber!"

"Shut up, you accursed temptress!" Mikhael shouted back at her. "My life is in danger, thanks to you! This is all your fault and *you* should be the one to die here, not me! Do the right thing and fall on your sword!"

Needless to say, this was a complete one-eighty from Mikhael calling Sasha his "Lady Luck" at the beginning of the battle. And not only was he double-crossing his bride-to-be, he was using his own

people as bargaining chips, as if it all came naturally to him.

“If the White Knights perish here, I can help you cover up their deaths,” Mikhael said, continuing to argue his case with me. “We can say they died attempting to slay the dragon! I can even help you wipe out the entire elven race, if that is your desire! As the Goddess is my witness, I will tell you everything you wish to know about Masters and Submasters. So please, allow me to join your exalted ranks!”

I stared wordlessly at Mikhael, utterly amazed by what I was hearing. Yes, I’d held out a faint hope that I might be able to give Sasha a taste of the exact same treachery and anguish I’d experienced in the Abyss, but this was almost *too* perfect. Sasha was crying bitter tears at being betrayed by the fiancé she’d loved and trusted, and not only that, Mikhael was basically repeating the same cruel words Sasha had spat at me three years earlier. *He didn’t disappoint at all*, I thought as I gazed at Mikhael in semi-awe—though the elf interpreted my silence to mean that his sob story hadn’t gotten through to me, so he started ranting angrily instead.

“I had nothing to do with *any* of this!” Mikhael raged. “If you kill me, you will be exactly the same as the people you despise! Is that what you want? I *said* I will tell you everything you want to know!”

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t want to be like them,” I said simply. If I was going to become in any way like the Concord of the Tribes, then I’d be better off living out the rest of my life holed up in the Abyss with my summons.



My response gave Mikhael a faint glimmer of hope. “You see? So you *have* to spare my life! I do not care if you kill her and the rest of them!”

“Sir Mikhael!” Sasha whined like a wounded animal, her tears mixed with snot. “Mikhaeeel!”

Mikhael did have a point. If I were to kill a totally innocent person, I would be no better than the Concord of the Tribes. In fact, I had even been prepared to spare both Mikhael *and* Sasha if he’d just given me the right answer at the start.

If Mikhael had chosen to die with Sasha in return for a quick, painless death, that would’ve been evidence that Sasha had found true love after attempting to assassinate me in the Abyss. Of course, I wouldn’t have been *truly* convinced that the two elves actually loved each other, but I wasn’t so cold-blooded that I would have completely overlooked this evidence of their love. In that light, I would’ve been open to the idea of showing them mercy and setting them free—though of course, I would’ve had to detain them in the Abyss until I was done taking my revenge against my sworn enemies and uncovering the truth. And their amnesty would’ve been entirely conditional on them not having committed any other crime, naturally.

Of course, these elves were too damn prideful and mercenary to ever choose self-sacrifice, but I’d laid the option on the table all the same. But Mikhael had decided to flip the table over altogether and curse me out in front of Ellie and Aoyuki, which meant even if I did want to let the two elves go for whatever reason, my two lieutenants would make sure they’d be paying the ultimate price anyway.

“You’re right. I don’t have a bone to pick with you,” I said to Mikhael, “so I’ll let the others decide what to do with you. Ellie, you may take it from here.”

“Of course, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie said in the sweetest, most syrupy voice you could imagine. “Leave it all to me.”

But the instant Ellie turned to face Mikhael, her sugary smile transformed into a look of pure hatred that she had somehow been managing to suppress for the entire duration of the battle. Aoyuki unleashed her own wave of bloodlust toward Mikhael, as did Iceheat and the rest of my fighters. The other five had apparently been told what had happened to me over the course of the fight via Telepathy. Still on the floor, Mikhael trembled under their searing glares, like a toddler cowering after angering a parent.

“How *dare* you slander my Blessed Lord Light!” Ellie said darkly. “It took everything I had to obey his order not to interfere—otherwise, I would have killed you on the spot! All I could do was seethe while you uttered that rank profanity at my Blessed Lord! So now, you will

suffer dearly before you die!”

“No...” Mikhael uttered. “No! I was simply ignorant of Light’s—I mean, Lord Light’s greatness!” he pleaded. “But everything is different now! After crossing swords with Lord Light, I understand better than anyone how omnipotent he truly is!”

“Oh? So you believe you really know how great Blessed Lord Light is now?” Ellie asked in a mockingly sweet way.

“Yes! Yes! I really do!” Mikhael said with a hint of urgency in his voice because he thought this might save him. But this last speck of hope was quickly snuffed out as Ellie started glowering at him again.

“You clearly have very little idea of how divine and majestic Blessed Lord Light is,” Ellie stated. “Your little performance just now failed to demonstrate that knowledge, so I will beat that lesson into you!”

Ellie’s eyes—which had become darker than the pits of Hell itself—pierced right through to Mikhael’s soul, causing the elf to finally realize deep in his bones what true despair felt like.

Mikhael screamed at the top of his lungs. “No, no, no! Move! Get out of my way!” The elf got to his feet and tried to escape, his Level 2500 power giving him an extra boost of speed over the average adventurer, but Iceheat and Mera blocked his path, so that he couldn’t get away. The Forbidden Witch, Ellie, didn’t even allow the elf to reach them, however.

“Dorn Fesseln!” Ellie’s spell caused thorny, steel-colored vines to appear on either side of Mikhael before wrapping themselves around the hapless elf. The thorns bit into Mikhael’s skin, causing blood to spurt from an untold number of small holes, but the elf was prepared to do whatever it took to escape, even if it meant tearing out chunks of his own flesh.

“These vines can’t hold me!” Mikhael screamed. “I can just tear them away and bear the pain!”

The vines were too strong for the Level 2500 elf, however, and as Mikhael struggled in vain to free himself from their grip, Ellie strolled slowly toward him. Her route took her past the seated Sasha, and as she drew up alongside her, she tutted in disgust in a way that made Sasha squeal with fright. If I were to try to interpret that clicking of the tongue, I would guess Ellie was trying to convey the following message: “If I could, I would rip out this woman’s internal organs with my bare hands, make her eat them, force her to feel every single ounce of pain imaginable, and *then*, make mincemeat out of her.”

Sasha had been the one who had shot me in the leg with an arrow three years ago, which meant Ellie—or rather, every single one of my allies in the throne room—was extremely unlikely to take pity on her. In fact, the only thing that had saved Sasha from a gruesome fate in

that particular moment was that I hadn't given Ellie permission to lay her hands on her, so the witch had to content herself with just giving Sasha the side-eye before continuing her amble toward Mikhael.

"I'm afraid there's nothing you can do about this Dorn Fesseln," Ellie told Mikhael in a singsong voice. "It may only be able to imprison one person, but it's a strategic-class spell that can even entrap people as powerful as us. Someone as low-level as you could never break free from it."

"*Strategic-class?!* " Mikhael screeched. "And you did that all by yourself, without chanting any sort of spell?! That is absolutely impossible! Not even the most celebrated elf mage is capable of that!"

"You are free to believe what you like," said Ellie. "But now that I have you here, I'll just break your legs so you can't run away again. Oh, and your arms too, just to make sure."

"What?! No! Please don't!" But it was too late and Mikhael screamed in pain as Ellie manipulated the vines to fracture all four of his limbs, his bones crunching and cracking like wet tree branches as the steel vines applied unbearable pressure in multiple places. The damage being done was so extensive, there was practically no bonesetter in the world that could have fixed it. Each time another bit of bone snapped, Mikhael shrieked and sobbed, his voice gurgling between breaths.

"Oh, be quiet. Silent!" Once Ellie's spell had muted Mikhael's anguished screams, the witch fixed the elf with a smug smile. "Now that I have you writhing around in agony, I'll take this opportunity to enter your mind and root through your memories. This whole process is going to hurt worse than hell, so consider the pain you are about to endure as payback for cursing at our Blessed Lord Light and attempting to do him harm!"

His face awash with salt tears, Mikhael's mouth flapped open and shut several times as he begged for mercy, but Ellie's Silent spell saved everyone from hearing whatever it was he was trying to say. Even if Mikhael had tried to fight back with combat magic, the pain he was feeling was so intense, he wouldn't have been able to concentrate enough to cast spells. Ellie manipulated the vines in such a way that brought Mikhael's head closer to her and she brought her hands up toward it. Almost as soon as Ellie had placed her hands either side of his head and focused her powers, blood started gushing out of Mikhael's ears, eyes, and nostrils, and his face convulsed from the unspeakable torture, his screams horrifically visible but completely unheard.

Throughout this whole harrowing scene, not one of the women on my team showed any pity for Mikhael. In fact, if anything, some thought the elf was getting off rather lightly after he'd hurled all those

insults at me. In any case, Ellie needed to read Mikhael's mind to extract the information I wanted about Masters, so nobody was going to fault her for that.

I left Ellie to her messy job and turned my full attention to Sasha. "I think it's about time I got my revenge on you, Sasha."

Sasha responded with a short shriek and shuffled backward on her backside, though she didn't get all that far because she soon found the pile of half-dead White Knights blocking her way. And to be honest, even if they hadn't been there, she wouldn't have gotten away from me because the rest of my allies had already surrounded her.

Knowing she was trapped, Sasha slowly scooched back toward me. Even though her face was drenched in cold sweat, she flashed me a coquettish glance and played the last card she felt was available to her. "D-Do you remember, Light, how all the other races were always so cruel to you, even after you joined our party?" Sasha said, her eyes fixed on mine. "You cried every time they abused you. Remember?"

I didn't say a word to this, so Sasha continued. "Do you remember how I would console you whenever you started crying? I would sit beside you, stroke your back, and wipe away your tears with my handkerchief. You remember that, right? I'm sure you do."

Sasha was trying to appeal to my emotions by bringing up ancient history, but it wasn't going to work. I just kept my mouth shut and stared icily down at her. This made her plead her case even harder as she tried to draw any kind of response out of me.

"I taught you how to hike in the woods, how to find food in the wild, even how to cook outdoors! When any of our partymates made fun of you, I was the first to leap to your defense! Please..." she begged. "Please say something!"

"Yes, you did teach me a lot of things," I said after a good long pause.

"See? You *do* remember, don't you?" Sasha replied, all smiles now that I had broken my silence. "I taught you everything, didn't I?"

Sasha used to be a scout in the Concord of the Tribes, and she had taught me what she knew about surviving in the wild. What she was saying was certainly true, and I couldn't deny the specifics, but that didn't tell the whole story.

"All of that—all of those things you did for me—it was all a lie. An act," I said, my eyes and voice turning glacial once more. "You've always looked down on humans, and you revealed your true self when you gleefully tried to kill me. I still get nightmares about the arrow you fired going right through my leg."

Sasha gulped dryly at this reminder of her past actions, and my recollection of Sasha's brutality caused my comrades to stare daggers at the elf and grind their teeth in red-hot fury. More sweat rushed to

Sasha's face as she tried to defend herself.

"N-No, please! I was ordered by my nation to do it, and Drago and Diablo were there to make sure I finished the job," Sasha wailed. "I couldn't defy them! If I had, they would've killed me! I'm not to blame. I had no choice. I had no choice..."

Toward the end, Sasha sounded like she was trying to convince herself more than me, but regardless, she knew that excuse wasn't going to work on me, nor the rest of my allies. She had no other option but to go for what truly was her last resort.

Sasha slowly undid her top and partially exposed herself to me. "Light, you used to like me back then, didn't you? I want you to know that I loved you too! Take me, Light! I'll do *anything* you want! Just please, let me live!"

Sasha wasn't above debasing herself completely if it meant saving her own skin. After witnessing this shameless display, Aoyuki finally snapped and launched into a rarely seen tirade. "That's enough out of you, you loathsome bitch," Aoyuki growled. "Not only do you refuse to admit your transgressions, you insult our almighty Master by offering up your body in a wanton act of false affection, hoping to trick him into forgiving you! For that, I will kill you. Then I will revive you several times over and slaughter you again and again. I will feed you alive to the most savage of my beasts, and make you rue the day you were born!"

Aoyuki wasn't the only one who had been totally repulsed by Sasha's behavior. Iceheat, Mera, Suzu, and Jack all looked like they were about to roast the elf where she sat through the sheer intensity of their volcanic fury. Nazuna was an exception; she didn't really understand why everyone was so angry, but she just went with the flow.

Aoyuki produced her weapon—a spiked metal collar attached to a chain—and swung it down on the floor, shattering the surface of it. The Muscle Angel hadn't been able to make so much as a scratch in the fifth-tier floor with its mace, but the Level 9999 Monster Tamer was more than capable of such a feat. To my mind, Aoyuki was the third strongest summon in my army and powerful enough to single-handedly defeat the entirety of the Elven Queendom, slaughtering every soldier and civilian within its borders, with energy to spare. And she was presently tramping toward Sasha, clearly out for blood.

"Aoyuki, did I say you were allowed to touch her?" I piped up with a note of warning in my voice. My interjection made the mighty Aoyuki tremble with fright.

"Mew..." she mumbled awkwardly. My admonishment to Aoyuki had also gotten through to my other fighters, and they straightened up too.

Once I'd dealt with Aoyuki going rogue, I turned my focus back to my target of revenge. "Don't worry, Sasha. I'm not actually going to kill you."

"L-Light!" The smile on Sasha's face looked like it was the brightest one that had ever graced her lips. But my next words quickly darkened her gleeful expression.

"I'll give you the same treatment as Garou, who I've already captured," I said. "I will keep you detained until I've uncovered the truth and decided whether or not to terminate all of the nonhuman races. Until that day comes, I will make you suffer the most excruciating pain conceivable. The pain will be never-ending, and there will be no reprieve from it. But you will not die. You will suffer in the deepest, darkest pits of the Abyss. But you will not die. No, I will not let you die, even if you beg me for the sweet release of death!"

"No..." Sasha gasped. "No..." A bloodcurdling scream of despair rose up from the pit of her stomach. "Noooooooooo!" This outburst reminded me that there was still one more thing I had to do to her before this mission was complete.

"Oops, almost forgot," I said as I activated my Item Box and produced an arrow from it. It actually came from an N Arrow card, but it was a perfectly normal arrow with no magical attributes at all—though due to my level, I didn't require a bow to fire it. I simply tossed the arrow casually in Sasha's direction and it zipped through the air before burying itself in the elf's left thigh—the exact same spot where she had shot me three years before. The resulting shriek was a mix of pain and confusion, mirroring the scream she had produced from my lips in the Abyss. I nodded several times as she wailed, satisfied with Sasha's wholly deserved torment.

"That's the same arrow wound you gave me all those years ago," I told Sasha before turning to my line of warriors. "Mera, you're free to take her to the bottom level of the Abyss now. Make sure you restrain her with all that stuff you have that looks like it's out of someone's worst fever dreams. Oh, and take away the White Knights too, will you?"

Mera let out a long, hard burst of her shrill banshee laugh. "Leave everything to me, Master!"

And almost as soon as Mera had finished speaking, a hideous collection of slimy appendages slithered out from beneath her skirt. The pulsating tendrils included tentacles, worms with fangs and scorpionesque exoskeletons, and even zombie arms, plus some other sickening creatures even I wasn't familiar with. Getting to her feet, Sasha half-limped, half-rushed toward me in an attempt to escape the gruesome mass.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Sasha yelled. “I’m sorry for trying to kill you! Please don’t do this to me! Light! Please, I’m begging you! I’ll do *anything*! Take me and have your way with me! Anything but *this*! Please! I’m so sorry! No... Noooooo!”

Mera’s creatures had wrapped themselves around Sasha and started reeling her in; Sasha had in turn wrapped her arms around my ankles and was holding on for dear life—but since I was Level 9999, I was completely immovable, so there was no way she was going to drag me with her. Sasha clung onto my legs with the viselike grip of an eagle, but her fingernails didn’t leave so much as a mark on them.

“No! No! Please, Light! Help! I’m sorry for trying to kill you! I’m sorry for lying to you! I’ll do anything you want! Anything! All I wanted was to be happy! All I wanted was to get back at my family! Oh, please no! Light! Save me, Lord Light! Save me, pleas—”

Mera’s writhing swarm of appendages worked itself up Sasha’s calf, beyond her wounded thigh, past her torso and shoulders, and when they reached her mouth, they smothered it along with most of her face. The only part of Sasha that was still uncovered were her hands that were still wrapped around my ankles, though the slimy creatures eventually overpowered her and she was forced to let go.

I had finally exacted my revenge on Sasha. The appendages dragged the elf toward Mera, leaving large streaks of blood on the floor in their wake. Before she disappeared under Mera’s skirt with her arms outstretched, I caught a glimpse of Sasha’s eyes, which were still tearfully begging me to show her mercy. But I was totally unmoved, and watched on impassively as the elf was devoured by the skirt monsters. From what I’d seen in Sasha’s eyes, she finally knew the true meaning of despair.

Chapter 16: New Information and a New Nation

“Aoyuki, you can take over from here,” I said.

“You can leave everything to me, Master,” Aoyuki assured me. “I swear on my life that I will manage this tower and take care of all the other tasks required of me.”

Aoyuki had opted to reply using proper words rather than her usual cat noises. Maybe she was still ashamed that I’d rebuked her for trying to harm Sasha without my permission.

In any case, I’d gotten my revenge on Sasha and captured the White Knights, who I hoped would be a valuable source of information. But in order to scour through their memories, the rest of the team and I needed to take them to the Abyss, so I decided to leave Aoyuki in charge of the Great Tower. She was the natural choice since she was already mind-controlling the monsters that were prowling in and around the tower. Even as we spoke, she was relaying orders to the Snake Hellhounds who were fighting the decoys in the forest—namely Gold, Nemumu, and my body double. Now that all the tower battles had wrapped up, Aoyuki needed to return the Red Dragon to the first floor as well as instruct the Snake Hellhounds to bring their fight against the decoys to an end.

“Okay, is everybody ready?” I asked my assembled warriors as I readministered my Soul Seal on the Gungnir, turning the weapon back into the ordinary staff it had looked like before the battle. My right hand had absorbed a whole lot of harmful black magic from the activated Gungnir, so I purified my hand using the SSSR High Exorcism card.

To be honest, there hadn’t really been any need to go as far as partially unsealing the Gungnir to beat Sasha and Mikhael, but they had pushed my buttons to such an extent that I just couldn’t let it go. Sure, the elves had provided a good field test for the Gungnir, but I *may* have gone slightly overboard.

The replies from my team to my question interrupted my train of thought.

“All ready to go, Blessed Lord Light,” said Ellie.

“I’m all set to head back!” Nazuna piped up.

“I, Iceheat, am prepared for departure,” the maid said, sounding quite officious.

“Keh! Heh! Heh! Heh!” cackled Mera. “I’ve got the vice-commander all wrapped up in a bow, so ready when you are.”

Suzu just looked at me timidly, so Lock spoke on her behalf. “My partner’s ready to leave too.”

“All good to go, bro,” Jack said.

I took out my SSR Teleportation card. “Teleportation to the Abyss—release!”

A flash of light instantly whisked me and my team home to my underground citadel, which was a great distance from the Elven Queendom. Ellie had canceled the teleportation jamming magic by this point, so I didn’t end up making a fool of myself like Mikhael had.



It had been a few days since I’d tossed Sasha into the deepest holding pits in the Abyss. I suspected by this point, she would be in such excruciating pain, her mind would have turned to suicide, but I wasn’t about to let her die that easily. Though unlike Garou, who I’d thrown into the holding cells before her, Sasha’s cell was filled to the brim with gross things of the type she hated the most.

As for the White Knights, we had squeezed every last drop of information from their memories and discovered they had committed several atrocities against humans, including straight-up murder. As punishment for their monstrous crimes, I sentenced them all to death. Leaving aside the wholesale slaughter, the info we did manage to glean from them was really interesting, even if a good portion of the memories seemed pretty fantastical. But since Ellie was the one who had extracted the info using her magic, I knew for a fact that if any bit of intelligence was based on falsehoods, it wasn’t down to anything the messenger had done.

At this particular moment in time, Ellie was sitting opposite me in my office in the Abyss, while I read the report she had written up. The most useful source of info had turned out to be the White Knights’ leader, Hardy, for as the son of the elf queen, he was privy to a bunch of the monarch’s secrets. That relationship meant there was a whole heap of substantive knowledge we could mine from his head. Unfortunately, the rest of the White Knights had proved to be of as little use as their former comrade, Kyto; they all had information that occasionally raised an eyebrow, but apart from that, there was nothing of value in their heads.

I finished reading the report, furrowed my brow, and leaned forward slightly over the desk with my hands steepled. “I’m not saying I doubt you, Ellie, but there are some things in here that I’m finding pretty hard to believe.”

“Oh, I don’t blame you if you doubt what you’re reading,” Ellie

said. "I myself couldn't believe some of the things I dredged up when I first scanned their memories."

Kyto's memories had suggested that the nations were fearful of Masters because they could potentially destroy the world if they were allowed to roam around unchecked. When we'd first come across this bit of info, none of us knew quite what it meant, but Hardy's memories had helped to fill in the blanks.

"It says here that if Masters were allowed to roam free, civilization itself would advance rapidly to a point where the world would be destroyed," I said. "So to prevent this from coming to pass, the elves take custody of these Masters when they find them, sequester them away somewhere, and give them the royal treatment, all to minimize the impact the Masters can have on the outside world."

"And this practice isn't based on some irrational superstition either," Ellie pointed out. "An advanced civilization did in fact exist in the distant past, but it crumbled and fell. Perhaps the whole world being destroyed is a bit of an exaggeration, but it is entirely plausible that a Master might have been the catalyst for the rise of an advanced civilization, only for it to meet its downfall later on for reasons unknown."

Ellie was alluding to the many ruins and artifacts that could be found dotted around the place that seemed to have been left behind by an advanced ancient civilization, as they all pointed to the kind of civilization that simply couldn't exist in this day and age. Nowadays, these ruins had either become quasi-dungeons home to a variety of monsters, or they existed as vaults for valuable items, complete with security systems developed by this ancient civilization. Many adventurers these days would quest in these ruins in search of relic-class weapons, extremely rare teleportation items, or even treasure troves. Ancient ruins were the most popular destinations for highly ambitious adventurers.

Now, you might be wondering what could destroy a high magic civilization that was more advanced than anything you could find in the modern era. To date, historians had been unable to agree on a definitive answer to this question, so the real story behind the course of events that led to its downfall remained a total mystery.

We also learned from Hardy that Masters only came from humans. Another useful nugget of information was that the nonhuman nations refused to make any kind of move to wipe out all the humans, because doing so would apparently cause someone to be designated as a "dark lord," which would eventually lead to the destruction of the aggressor nation by a Master.

"But from what I'm reading here, these Masters were simply responsible for advancing a civilization. None of them actually

destroyed the world,” I summed up.

“Yes, that’s correct,” Ellie said. “Going off Hardy’s memories, these Masters possessed powerful Gifts, weapons, magic, fighting abilities, and knowledge, but all they did with these assets was contribute to the advancement of civilization. It’s very unlikely that any of them used their powers to ‘destroy the world,’ so to speak.”

“I see,” I said. “So what you’re basically saying is...”

To sum up, Masters used the powerful abilities, knowledge, and items they possessed to form connections with royalty and other elites around the world, and by using this influential alliance they had forged, they were able to create an advanced civilization that had existed at one time, but had crumbled long ago. Given this history, many now believed creating such a highly sophisticated civilization again would lead to the destruction of the world.

“If that’s what they believe, it stands to reason that the royals and elites of today would favor the safety and security offered by the status quo over the upheaval an advanced civilization might threaten,” I said. “After all, if I were them, I wouldn’t want any Masters entering the picture either. So does that explain why they were so keen to find out whether or not I was a potential Master? And even after coming to the conclusion that I wasn’t, they attempted to kill me anyway, just to be on the safe side?”

The dragonute leader of the Concord of the Tribes, Drago, had told me three years prior that the party had been given an order to assassinate me. “We were told to kill you. Just to make sure,” he had said to me at the time.

“It must have been their nations that ordered my assassination, judging from what Drago was implying,” I said as I ruminated on this in my office in the Abyss. “But even so...”

On the face of it, it seemed perfectly logical to kill a Master if one threatened to destroy the world through civilizational advancement. But why would A lead directly to B? There was no shred of evidence to prove that this was a case of cause and effect. Or at least, I wasn’t aware of any kind of proof. If I *were* to speculate on it, I might put forward a supposition that people may have fought over the spoils of an advanced civilization. Or perhaps the advanced civilization had declared itself the dominant superpower, superior to all the other nations, leading to either a world war, or the complete isolation of that civilization. But both of these scenarios were just guesswork on my part, and they left out a whole bunch of factors I’d need to consider for them to work in practice. In any case, there was one inconsistency that was bugging me.

“Is it just me, or isn’t it more dangerous than it’s worth to attempt to assassinate a potential Master?” I asked Ellie. The Elven Queendom

kept Masters alive so they could intermix the bloodlines and give birth to powerful warriors. So if they had found a potential Master, there must have been *some* merit to keeping them around, right? And if this candidate did actually turn out to be a Master, wouldn't attempting to assassinate them blow up in the faces of the ones who gave the order?

"No, you're absolutely right on that, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said, agreeing with me almost immediately. "Even if the person they kill *doesn't* turn out to be a Master, a *real* Master might catch wind of the assassination and view the ones who gave the order as enemies. It's simply too big a risk to take. After all, if the potential Master is a low-level adventurer, they could easily just abandon him or make him join another party."

"Yeah, you said it," I replied. "There was so little to gain and so much to lose by assassinating me."

Of course, it'd be a different story if they managed to completely cover up the assassination, but at the same time, there was no guarantee a killing of that nature would remain totally under wraps forever. Heck, I was living proof that cover-ups could fail. So the question remained: what could prompt them to take such a massive risk in killing me?

"Does this mean there's more background info on all this that not even Hardy or the rest of the White Knights are aware of?" I asked Ellie.

"Yes, I'm afraid that's probably the case," Ellie replied.

"Should've known," I muttered. "None of this would make a lick of sense otherwise."

Trying to glean any more info out of Hardy would be fruitless; we'd scanned all of his memories and the only things that remained were basically his recollections of massacring humans, and his daily interactions with his mother, the queen. For that reason, we decided to move on to the next phase of our operation.

"Ellie, from what you've seen in Hardy's memories, are you *sure* the Elven Queendom has no fighting force more powerful than the White Knights?"

"They definitely don't, Blessed Lord," Ellie replied.

"Then we shouldn't run into any problems," I said. "Proceed with the next part of the plan."

"Anything you say, Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie said cheerily, smiling in a way that'd make any man fall in love with her. "I'll go overthrow the Elven Queendom as retaliation for attacking our tower."

I met her grin with one of my own. "I'm counting on you, Ellie."

A suffocating silence born out of a mix of impatience and dread swept through the council chamber in the Elven Queendom palace. Seated on her throne facing the long conference table, the supreme ruler of the queendom, Queen Lif VII, lazily fanned her face with her folding fan, but her deeply furrowed brow betrayed the fact that she was thoroughly displeased. The chancellor was sitting in his usual spot at the near end of the table to the queen's left, the middle-aged elf's legs fidgeting nervously as he mopped the sweat from his brow with his handkerchief and fiddled uncomfortably with his monocle. The reason for this restlessness was the empty seat directly opposite the chancellor, which was where Hardy the Silent would usually sit, to the right of his mother, the queen.

The officer in charge of the knights who were patrolling the highway in an effort to keep it clear of monsters broke the awkward silence by pressing on with his report. It was pretty clear that he would rather be anywhere else than in this chamber at this particular moment in time.

"When the operation to the Great Mystery Tower was launched several days ago, we assigned human adventurers to distract the monsters in the woods," the knight officer recapped. "It appears these humans performed their role practically flawlessly, so we believe there were no issues with that section of the mission."

The aforementioned human adventurers had included the Black Fools, the party that had brought back information on the tower before Sasha had filed her own report. The Black Fools had led a number of other human adventurers on a side mission to draw out the giant snake-tailed quadrupeds and make sure the Level 1000 creatures didn't return to the tower while the main mission was ongoing. The three members of the Black Fools in particular had reportedly performed spectacularly well. A black-haired boy wearing a fool's mask had repeatedly fired off combat-class magic without needing to chant the full spells for them, and not only did this boy save his two partymates from calamity on several occasions, he saved some of the other adventurers too. Another member of the Black Fools—a tanned woman who looked like a fairy princess—had used her superior scouting abilities to keep her comrades safe, while the third member—a knight with armor made of gold—used his shield to protect others from attack.

"The decoys also included human adventurers with oddly styled hair—I believe they call themselves the 'Mohawks'—and they provided superb backup to the rest of the fighters," the officer continued. "Although there were several casualties in the battle with the monsters, there were no fatalities. The humans performed much better than we were expecting, and if we were to grade them on their

exploits on this diversionary operation, we would give them full marks.”

It was rare for elves to shower praise on members of a race they regularly referred to as “inferiors.” According to one elf soldier on the ground, the fierce, white-knuckle fight was “something out of an epic tale.”

Of course, the Level 1000 quadrupeds had been the Snake Hellhounds controlled by Aoyuki, and because *only* deploying Snake Hellhounds would have raised suspicions, she’d also sent some other forest monsters into the fight as a way of making sure that the total numbers weren’t too much or too little. Aoyuki had instructed the monsters to make it look like Nemumu, Gold, and fake Light were performing heroically in the battle, while also making the Mohawks look good as a reward for all of the support they had provided in the forest. Thanks to this kayfabe—or rather, this convincing performance by the monsters, to put it more charitably—the Black Fools and the Mohawks had impressed the elves and raised their reputations. Nonhuman adventurers were extremely jealous of their achievement, but all the human questers in the Elven Queendom cheered this outcome.

The knight officer wrapped up his report on the diversionary operation, then proceeded on to the bad news: the White Knights’ main mission to infiltrate the tower. The officer paused briefly as he wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

“We’re still unclear on the details of what happened to the White Knights after they departed for the tower,” the head knight said. “Based on past precedent where circumstances have been similar, it is safe to assume that the order has been wiped out.”

Queen Lif clenched her teeth on hearing the phrase “wiped out,” and her eyes grew larger than saucers as her face transformed into a horrified mask of grief. Her beloved son, Hardy, the mightiest elf warrior in the known world, had been declared killed in battle.

The chancellor—who was sweating bullets by this point—fired off a series of questions to the head knight. “A-Are you sure this assumption of yours is correct? Remember, this is the White Knights we’re talking about here. Is it even *possible* to wipe out a group of fighters of that caliber?”

“Based on past experience, it is the only plausible scenario,” the knight leader reiterated.

The White Knights had been expected to complete the tower mission in as little as a day, and based on this assumption, they had only taken minimal provisions with them. If Hardy had determined the battle could not be wrapped up within a couple of days, he would have ordered the White Knights to retreat. But several days had now

passed since they'd set out, and there had been no sign of the White Knights, so the natural assumption was they had all been wiped out.

This meant that there was something lurking on the doorstep of the Elven Queendom capital that was so powerful, even the White Knights couldn't defeat it. Furthermore, this mysterious foe had defeated the White Knights while they were armed with two rare phantasma-class weapons—though only the chancellor and the count knew about this extra detail. This unknown enemy could spell the end for the Elven Queendom if they had already defeated the White Knights, who were reputed to be so powerful, they could lay waste to their own nation if they so desired. In this moment, the queendom was facing a crisis that superseded any thoughts of replacing the elf matriarchy with a total patriarchy. It was no wonder sweat was pouring off the chancellor by the bucketload as his face grew increasingly pale.

Luckily for the chancellor, he didn't need to mention the two phantasma-class weapons for people in the council room to understand just how much peril the queendom was in. A heated debate broke out among the council members on what their next move should be.

"I think we should call on the Dragonute Empire, the Demonkin Nation, the Dark Elf Islands, and the other nations to help us in this matter," said one.

"That's total insanity! You want us to tell *other nations* that we've lost our best fighters?" said another.

"Indeed," a third agreed. "We'd lose face if we begged the Dark Elf Islands for help."

"Isn't it possible that the White Knights are still alive? Maybe they were transported from the tower to places unknown?"

"Well, we can't rule out that possibility, but..."

"We still have the reserve units that were backing up the White Knights! If we send them into the tower, they can take care of any Red Dragon that might be residing there!"

"Have you lost it? The White Knights themselves couldn't defeat this Red Dragon! That thing will definitely notice if we send a whole army into the forest, and it's the kind of move that might stir up any other monsters in there too. A battle like that would just be a waste of blood and treasure!"

"How about we give the guild a massive pile of money to hire the best adventurers to go conquer that tower?"

"Well, maybe, but—"

"I think—"

The council chamber was alive with debate, but there seemed to be no consensus on how to resolve this crisis. With the discussions

going nowhere, the atmosphere in the room quickly became highly charged, to the point where it looked like the talks might devolve into a physical disagreement rather than just a verbal one. This outcome was prevented, however, by a soldier who came running into the chamber with only a cursory knock at the door. The council members all turned toward the pale-faced soldier, their annoyance at being interrupted writ large on their faces, but before any of them could raise their voice in admonishment, the soldier spoke first.

“D-Dragons!” the soldier yelled. “Over a hundred of them! And not just above the palace—they’re flying over the *whole capital!*”

As one, the council gasped at this news.



A swarm of airborne dragons had indeed descended on the Elven Queendom’s capital, circling high above it and blotting out the sun. The Red Dragon—the biggest of the flying beasts—loomed large over the palace, and straddling atop this ruby-scaled leviathan was a young human woman in witch’s garb, a dark hood covering her head.

“This is a message to the simpletons who dared to attack my Great Tower,” the woman announced, peering down at the palace below. “You will bring your leader to me at once. If you fail to do so, I shall reduce your city to ash!”

The young woman—Ellie—was speaking unexpectedly loud enough to be heard not just inside the palace itself, but all throughout the elf capital. But she wasn’t actually raising her voice, since even if she tried, it would still be impossible for anyone on the ground to hear her. No, Ellie was using magic to make herself audible to every citizen in the city—even those cloistered within the walls of the palace.

“If you want proof that we can turn this city into a smoldering pile of rubble, allow me and my darling dragons to perform a little demonstration for you,” Ellie said.

She signaled to all one hundred-plus dragons to fly out to an unpopulated stretch of land a fair distance from the city walls and unleash their firebreath on it in unison. Multicolor columns of flame in every shape and variety imaginable lit up the sky and shook the ground on impact as violently as any earthquake. The dragonfire kicked up a massive cloud of smoke and dust that completely blanketed the capital, drawing screams and other sounds of terror from the city’s residents.

Ellie waited for the cacophony of elven shrieks mixed with bestial roars to subside before repeating her ultimatum. “My dragon and I will soon land in the palace courtyard, and I demand you bring out the person in charge to meet me there. You have three minutes to do so, or I will wipe this city off the map.”

As soon as she had given these instructions, Ellie signaled to her Red Dragon to flap its wings and swoop down toward the palace courtyard.



Inside the palace, it had devolved into a frenzy of confusion and fright.

“Where did those dragons come from?”

“What are all the knights *doing*?”

“Your Majesty! You must seek refuge *at once*!”

“Wait, we can’t let her do that! That woman said she wanted to see the person in charge in three minutes, or she’d burn the city down!”

“You louse! Are you suggesting we give up our queen as a live sacrifice?!”

It’s complete pandemonium in there, Ellie thought, still sitting atop the Red Dragon as it swooped down. *In any case, these elves have next to no magical protection, meaning I can hear practically everything they’re saying inside the palace. Haven’t they ever heard of counterespionage magic?*

Ellie’s impressions were, of course, entirely biased by her astronomical power level, so even though the Elven Queendom prided itself on its possession of a wealth of magical capabilities and items that outshone most other nations, the competencies of the elves seemed almost primitive to the superwitch.

The Red Dragon landed in the palace’s courtyard, where more than a hundred fretful guards stood at the ready with swords and lances. Undaunted by her welcoming party, Ellie leaped down from the dragon’s neck and waited for the leader of the elves, Queen Lif, to present herself, while the elven nobles continued their fierce argument over who should go out to face the hooded witch.

“The ‘person in charge’ obviously means Her Majesty. I think Her Majesty should go out there and speak with her.”

“Why are you so intent on sacrificing our queen? This is a job for the chancellor!”

“What are the palace guards playing at?! Why aren’t they even attempting to slay the dragon?!”

“How would killing one dragon out of a hundred help the situation? And shouldn’t it be the knight commander who goes out to meet her? After all, he’s the person in charge of our army.”

Why are these elves wasting so much time arguing about who’s in charge? Ellie thought. *Even I couldn’t have foreseen this.*

Since the high council was pressed for time due to the time limit Ellie had given them, the quarreling elves eventually came to the compromise of having the entirety of the top brass venture out to confront the witch. But even as the elves approached the courtyard, Ellie could still hear the members of the court wrangling over who should be taking the lead.

There really is no hope for these people, is there? Ellie thought, rolling her eyes in exasperation. There was no need for her to worry about people seeing through her fearsome and imperious guise though, since the hood completely obscured her face from view.

The high council finally filtered into the courtyard with seconds to spare of the appointed three minutes. A woman wearing a crown and holding a folding fan stepped forward, and when she spoke, there wasn't a hint of trepidation in her voice, even though she was drenched in sweat, such was her panic.

"I am Queen Lif VII, ruler of the Elven Queendom!" the monarch declared. "You will explain at once why you dare to threaten us with this swarm of dragons! This brazen display goes beyond the height of insolence, and you will remove your dragons at once!"

"Do you have any idea how ridiculous you sound right now?" Ellie retorted. "*You* were the one who sent a group of armed vandals to attack my Great Tower, yet *I'm* the one who's being insolent? Don't make me laugh!"

Queen Lif stared in shock at her. "What? Do you mean to tell me that *you* are the mistress of that tower?!"

As the crowd of elves whispered to each other in astonishment, Ellie confirmed their suspicions. "Yes, that's correct. I am the true owner of the Great Tower. Yet, some days ago, a handful of misbegotten elves wandered into my tower uninvited to cause mayhem. From what those savages told me, they were knights from this realm who had been given orders to pillage and plunder my tower."

"Who the devil are you?" Queen Lif barked. "What have you done to Hardy?! What have you done with my knights?!"

"Who am I? Moi?" Ellie taunted. "For the time being, you may call me the Wicked Witch of the Tower. As for your precious knights, I'm not obligated to reveal their fates to you."

"You vile wretch!" Queen Lif shouted bitterly, unsure whether to assume her son Hardy was dead or alive based on Ellie's reply.

"Now, allow me to ask *you* a question," Ellie said, ignoring the mournful scowl on the queen's face. "Why would you send those brutish knights to pillage and plunder my Great Tower in the first place?"

"They were *not* sent to pillage the tower!" Queen Lif snapped back. "We found out that this Red Dragon was living in that tower, and we dispatched the White Knights to deal with it! Any sovereign nation would try to rid itself of such a threat within its borders, especially one residing a stone's throw away from the seat of power!"

"Was that your *real* objective?" Ellie sneered. "How do I know you simpletons weren't planning to just pilfer all my valuables and the

fruits of my research? I need to confirm what you're saying is true."

Of course, Ellie had known all along that the White Knights hadn't come to the tower to plunder it, since it was her side that had lured the fighters there in the first place. She was simply inventing a pretext so she could magically probe Queen Lif's mind for more information about Masters. *I need to verify the intelligence I extracted from Hardy's memories, and gather as much other useful information as I can too*, Ellie thought. *However, there's no real reason for me to tell her my true purpose.*

"Confirm? How—Don't come near me!" Queen Lif wailed.

"Your Majesty!" one of the elves yelled.

"Don't let this trespasser near the queen! Kill her!" shouted another.

At first, the elf soldiers were understandably hesitant to rush at someone who was standing beside a Red Dragon. But this so-called "Wicked Witch of the Tower" looked like a regular young woman with delicate features—albeit a drop-dead gorgeous one—and it was her unassuming appearance combined with the potential to win the queen's favor that eventually motivated the soldiers to charge at Ellie with their lances and swords raised. Of course, they had no chance of winning this confrontation, since they were up against a foe who was able to tame a Red Dragon.

"W-Wait!" yelled the chancellor, whose survival instincts rivaled that of a wild animal's. His warning was in vain, however.

"Sacer Arbor!" Ellie chanted.

Sharply pointed tree branches instantly sprouted out of the ground underneath the crowd of elves and impaled the soldiers, the chancellor, and everyone in the queendom's top brass, save for the queen herself. The branches then fed off the blood and flesh of the victims they had skewered before transforming into fully formed tree monsters with human faces. Sacer Arbor was yet another strategic-class spell Ellie had in her arsenal, and the sight of the carnage wrought by the demon trees drew a series of short, piercing screams from Queen Lif, who found herself the lone survivor of the group. In a state of shock, the queen's legs gave way and she fell backward onto her posterior, as Ellie approached the supreme ruler with a sense of purpose.

"Allow me to read your memories, Your Majesty!" Ellie said to her.

"Eek! No, stay away from me!" Queen Lif cried as she tried to scramble back to her feet.

"My word. Are you trying to run away from me?" Ellie said in saccharine tones that had more than a hint of derision in them. "That's not going to help me read your memories. And bad girls need to be

punished, don't you agree? Dorn Fesseln!"

The unvoiced magic made steel briar vines appear, which proceeded to wrap themselves around Queen Lif. The ruler tried to extricate herself from these painfully thorny binds, but as this was a strategic-class spell, it was a hopeless endeavor. Now that her target had been immobilized, Ellie grabbed Queen Lif's head and started scanning her memories.

"Don't!" yelled Queen Lif. "What are you doing to me—Aaaaaah!"

"Gosh, and I'm not even using my full power," Ellie yelled in annoyance above the screaming. "Why are you elves always so sensitive to a little pain? Silent!"

Ellie was quick to cast a spell that would block Queen Lif's anguished shrieks from reaching her ears before resuming her mind reading. When Ellie had probed Mikhael's memories, she had purposely gone overboard with the pain she was inflicting as retaliation for the insults and aspersions the White Knight had hurled at Light during their battle in the tower. As a result, Ellie had pretty much rendered Mikhael a vegetable, but this time around, Ellie refrained from excessively torturing Queen Lif, since she needed her to be of sound mind later on.

Even working under these constraints, Ellie probed Queen Lif's memories thoroughly. Other elf soldiers stationed in the city had congregated in front of the palace in response to the commotion in the courtyard, but the tree monsters that had been forged from the blood of the fallen palace guards repelled the troops with their armlike branches and kept them from reaching Ellie.

"Archers, fire!" a commander yelled. "Mages, direct your attacks at that witch! We need to save our queen, whatever the cost!"

"I-It's not working!" a subordinate piped up. "None of our shots are even reaching that sorceress!"

Ellie's magic had transformed over a hundred palace guards and court elites into tree monsters, and the sheer number of creatures meant there was a near-impenetrable barrier between the elf soldiers and the witch. And not only were these anthropomorphic trees able to repel swords and arrows, they were also resistant to flames and other magical attacks. The trees all suddenly screeched simultaneously, the sound seeming to rise from the depths of Hell itself, as their branches extended at high speed and impaled a number of the attacking soldiers.

"Argh! A branch just got me in the leg!" yelled one soldier. "What the..." he gasped. "It's sucking out my blood!"

The branches were leeching the soldiers dry before detaching themselves from their trees and transforming their victims' bodies into even more tree monsters. The surviving elf soldiers who witnessed this

spectacle screamed and recoiled in fright.

The tree monsters were resistant against physical and magical attacks, plus they could use their branches to create copies of themselves, but they weren't without weaknesses. For one, tree monsters were rooted to a single spot, so it was relatively easy for anyone facing them to bypass them altogether, as long as they avoided getting stabbed by the bloodsucking branches. Tree monsters could also be cut down if the force of an attack overwhelmed their resistance stats. And lastly, the tree monsters only lived for twenty-four hours.

Then again, even if the elf soldiers were able to hack their way through this forest of tree monsters, they would still have to face off against the Red Dragon at the end of it all. A single swipe of its scaly arm or a blast of its firebreath would be enough to wipe out the soldiers instantly. The only reason the Red Dragon hadn't attacked anyone yet was because the tree monsters were already coping adequately.

"Ugh, I can't concentrate with all this *noise*!" Ellie huffed over the sound of yelling soldiers. "I managed to shut this woman up, but what's the point if the rest of these damn elves won't stay quiet? I'll have to cast more Silent spells before I lose my mind."

Ellie expanded her Silent bubble until she finally had the peace and quiet she desired for engaging in the messy job of reading Queen Lif's memories. It took Ellie a full hour before she'd gleaned all the info she needed. When she'd finished, she released Queen Lif from the steel thorns and let her slump to the ground, where she lay exhausted from her painful ordeal, her face and garments stained with tears, snot, saliva, and other bodily fluids.

"I now realize you mistakenly assumed that a dragon was residing in my Great Tower, so you sent those barbaric knights there on a mission to destroy it," said Ellie. "None of your memories contradict what you told me earlier, *Your Majesty*."

As the last word passed her lips, Ellie splashed water—magically, of course—on Queen Lif to revive her, but the monarch didn't even have the strength to cry out at being doused in this way. However, Queen Lif wasn't allowed the small crumb of relief blacking out would bring, since Ellie's magic prevented her from falling unconscious.

Queen Lif gazed fearfully up at the Wicked Witch of the Tower, but the hood she was wearing stopped the queen from getting a good look at her adversary's face. In reality, Ellie was wearing an Unlimited Gacha item—the SSR Faceveil Hood—which blocked other people from seeing her face, no matter how hard they peered into it.

"I am a human who has been researching sorcery deep underground," Ellie announced to Queen Lif and the surviving

soldiers. “From what I have gathered from the memory of your queen here, it appears all of you have made this world very cruel for humans. As a human myself, this discovery repulses me to no end. Given what I have learned, I hereby pronounce that absolute autonomy be granted to all humans.”

Ellie glanced at the surviving soldiers before continuing. “I will no longer allow this nation to practice human slavery. You elves will transfer all of your human slaves over to me, so that I may look after them. If even a single one of you elves fails to free your slaves or stands in the way of my order being carried out, I will kill every last man, woman, and child of your race and feed your corpses to my dragons. I will send my people to collect the slaves, so make sure you have them ready for us when they arrive.”

Although nobody could see Ellie’s face through the SSR Faceveil Hood, the witch beamed all the way through her proclamation, and any man who could have seen her smile would have fallen for her instantly. The elves quickly spread the word of this manumission order throughout the Elven Queendom capital, nobody daring to disobey the witch from the tower.



When Ellie returned from her mission to overthrow the Elven Queendom’s seat of power, she prepared a report for me to read in my office on the bottom level of the Abyss. Once I had finished perusing the report, I was full of praise for my lieutenant. “You really are amazing, Ellie,” I said. “Not only did you bring the Elven Queendom to its knees, you even brought back some more information on Masters from the queen!”

Ellie went bright red and literally shuddered with joy at my compliment, but she still managed to sound somewhat modest in her reply. “Oh, no, it was all thanks to you, Blessed Lord Light.”

From what I had read in Ellie’s report, the queen’s memories regarding Masters largely matched the intelligence we had extracted from her son, Hardy. I supposed it was true what they said: families really didn’t keep secrets from each other. But there was one nugget of information that immediately caught my eye.

““Every four years, the leaders from eight of the world’s nations hold a secret meeting at the Principality of the Nine to exchange information about Masters,”” I read aloud. ““Humans are excluded from these meetings.””

The topics discussed at the last of these meetings didn’t seem all that extraordinary, with the participating leaders mostly briefing their counterparts on what was, by and large, the status quo. But it was in the moments immediately following the event itself where things got

interesting.

“When Queen Lif left her seat following the conclusion of the secret meeting, she heard someone airing an additional justification for the assassination order that was passed down,” I continued to read. “This person whispered, ‘We can’t rule out the possibility that he might be something *other* than a Master.’”

“That’s right. The specifics of it aren’t clear because it was a faint bit of secondhand info she’d kept deep in the back of her mind, and the memory of it had already started going fuzzy,” said Ellie. “It might just mean they think you’re a Submaster or a prospective Master. Or maybe—”

“Or maybe there’s an entity out there that’s completely different from a Master,” I suggested.

“Yes, you read my mind,” Ellie said.

It wouldn’t make sense for “something *other* than a Master” to be just another way of saying a “Submaster” or a “potential Master.” For one thing, there was practically no reason to kill a Submaster, since they could trace their bloodlines directly to Masters. And assuming those who had plotted my demise had tried to kill me precisely *because* I was a potential Master, then why go out of their way to bring up the likelihood that I could be something else entirely?

“Ellie, do we know the race of the person who said this?” I asked.

“I’m afraid we don’t,” Ellie replied. “Queen Lif only happened to overhear somebody mentioning it in hushed tones, and we’re talking about a room filled with bodyguards and a load of other attendees, so it was probably difficult for her to identify who exactly said it.”

However, the fact Queen Lif hadn’t found this utterance all that meaningful and had basically ignored it was an important clue in and of itself.

“This suggests the elves aren’t familiar with the context that might lead to a remark like this,” said Ellie. “The same would likely apply to the beastfolk and the centaurs too, since those two races would be considered too low-ranking to be granted full access to that kind of knowledge. That leaves the onifolk, the dark elves, the dwarves, the demonkin, and the dragonutes as the likely source of the information.”

“Does Queen Lif know anything at all about these potentially dangerous beings that aren’t Masters?” I asked.

“No, she doesn’t, largely due to historical reasons,” Ellie explained. “Masters throughout history have been drawn to the elves because of their natural beauty, and this attraction has served the elves well over the years, because of their desire to gain the Masters’ bloodlines for themselves. But the elf women that were handed over to the Masters were often forced to endure all sorts of horrendous experiences, and what’s more, most of the women chosen to bed the

Masters came from the upper echelons of the Elven Queendom—sometimes even from the royal family itself. This was to ensure that the secret stayed within a very select circle of people.”

This was the reason the hatred the elves had for humans intensified the further up their social ladder you went, according to Ellie. The Masters who had apparently violated the upper-class elf women in the past had all been human.

“The elves are a prideful race, and they loathe the fact that Submasters can trace their ancestry back to humans, so that aspect has been kept a secret known only to a few at the top,” Ellie continued. “Under Queen Lif, only she and her son, Hardy, knew of this dirty little secret. Because of this, it appears the royals have come to hate Masters—and by extension, all humans—even more.”

Ellie paused briefly, then continued her explanation. “Any elf royalty that encountered these Masters in the past must have felt vastly inferior by comparison. The royal family seeks the blood of Masters, but at the same time, they subconsciously avoid any information on them. So ironically, that’s why the elves as a race aren’t all that well-informed about Masters.”

So all the elves had become as antihuman as they were because the nobility hated human Masters? I decided to park that particular train of thought for the time being, and leaned back in my chair.

“So there’s another dangerous being out there that isn’t a Master, huh?” I thought aloud. Was that the reason those nations had tried to assassinate me? Because I might become one of these beings? I lacked the necessary information to draw any solid conclusions from this, however, so instead of dwelling on useless speculation, I decided to continue reading Ellie’s report and focus on something else.

“It says here you were considering turning the Elven Queendom into our colony once you’d subjugated the monarchy,” I said. “But I don’t see any point in doing that. So the question is: what *should* we do with the elves?”

“It certainly wouldn’t be any trouble for us to colonize the Elven Queendom,” Ellie said. “But as you suggest, a colony wouldn’t be of any material benefit to us.”

Colonizing the Elven Queendom basically meant stripping the nation of its sovereignty. Yes, the queendom *was* a major economic power and we could extract significant resources from it, but my allies and I didn’t actually need the money, due to my Unlimited Gacha. It also didn’t seem like a wise choice to publicly diminish the Elven Queendom’s status as a sovereign nation. The Great Tower was protected by a wild forest that ran adjacent to the queendom in the west, and the nation’s border was naturally secured by a mountain range to the north and by the sea to the south. If a coalition of nations

were to mount a military campaign to conquer the Great Tower, their only pathway to it would be from the east.

From that perspective, we needed to keep the Elven Queendom fully intact so it could act as our shield in the event of an invasion. Ellie's mind probe of Queen Lif had verified that the queendom did not have the military capacity to rebel against us, and we could pretty much destroy the nation any time we wanted. But I figured it would be better to use the elves in a way that suited our needs, and if anything were to ultimately go wrong, we could always abandon the tower and regroup in the Abyss.

"If we were to decide to colonize the Elven Queendom, you'd have to share your Gift with the elves," Ellie pointed out. "Those awful creatures don't deserve any of your blessings."

Ellie's hostility against the elves was so all-encompassing by this point that she actually puffed out her cheeks angrily as she said this. I found it adorable, but at the same time, understood that it came from her revulsion of the elves' antihuman bigotry. And speaking of antihuman bigotry...

"From what I'm reading here, the liberation of the human slaves in the queendom is going smoothly," I noted.

"Indeed it is," Ellie said, her bubbly mood restored. "The elves have released about five thousand slaves so far. We're looking after them in the area immediately around the tower and teaching them what they need to know to support themselves."

Ellie had been the one who'd suggested forcing the elves to comply with the radical declaration of granting absolute autonomy to humans. In turn, the Elven Queendom had drawn up a legal ordinance officially banning human slavery. We had assigned the task of collecting the slaves from the slave traders, aristocrats, and other owners of humans to the Level 500 fairy maids, who were accompanied by Snake Hellhounds and dragons to make doubly sure the emancipation order would be followed to the letter.

Thanks to these enforcement actions, the elves had been releasing slaves without an iota of resistance. The man who had been whipped the day Sasha found the note I'd left for her had gained his freedom. The girls that had been rescued by the Mohawks and "sold" to one of my merchants for safeguarding were also released knowing they would never be enslaved again.

It looks like that one girl who was forced to be monster bait has learned how to read, write, and do math under that merchant, I thought. And now she's helping him with his work as if they were father and daughter. Maybe we should open up a shop near the tower someday and let her run it.

The fact we were safeguarding and supporting former slaves near

the Great Tower would undoubtedly attract attention from all around the world, and there was a very real possibility that the other nations might band together to destroy the tower if it became a symbol of human freedom. After all, the oppression of the human race was linked directly to the existence of Masters, who could only arise among humans, and there now happened to be a large group of humans all gathered in one place. The other nations weren't going to turn a blind eye to this development, which explained why Ellie had said during our initial information session that the tower would help us determine the true strength of the rest of the nations if they were to wage war on us.

"What military capabilities will they deploy?" she had said back then. "Will they use trump cards we don't yet know about?" If the worst were to happen, Ellie had added, "our enemies end up destroying this tower, but that would still leave our real headquarters in the Abyss unscathed."

Of course, I wasn't planning on giving up the tower without a fight, and the Elven Queendom would act as our shield if the other nations did decide to attack.

"I was able to get my picture-perfect revenge on Sasha, we're another step closer to the truth thanks to all this useful information, and we've gained a whole nation of useful pawns," I said, praising Ellie for her work. "Your revenge plan really did maximize what there was to get out of it. I can't thank you enough, Ellie."

With a muffled squeal, Ellie tried in vain to keep her body from shuddering happily at what appeared to be the biggest thrill of her life, but she quickly regained her composure and curtsied in response. "There's no need to thank me," she said. "I only wish there was more I could do to assist you."

It was fairly obvious that she was mentally pumping her fist over the idea that her accomplishment had elevated her to the position of top lieutenant, but she *had* done a good job on the revenge plot, so I let it slide with a wry chuckle. *Thanks to her, I feel like I've actually taken a step or two forward*, I reflected.

While I was merrily lost in thought, Mei contacted me via SR Telepathy, which I found really strange. Since placing her in charge of my stronghold while I was operating up on the surface, Mei hadn't left the Abyss, not even once. If she had wanted to tell me something, she could have just walked over to my office.

"Sorry, Ellie. I'm getting a Telepathy message from Mei."

"From Mei?" Ellie asked blankly, also confused why Mei hadn't just come to talk to me directly.

After excusing myself from Ellie, I focused my mind on Mei's Telepathy call. "Mei, what is it? Has something happened that's

stopping you from coming to speak to me here?”

“No, Master Light, but I have received intelligence that needs your immediate attention, so I took it upon myself to contact you through Telepathy,” Mei said. “We have been informed that one of your betrayers—the dark elf, Sionne—is close to death deep within a dungeon.”

“What?” I practically yelled. “Sionne’s *dying*?!” As soon as I heard this piece of news about one of my eight sworn enemies, I immediately forgot about the Elven Queendom and all the unanswered questions this particular episode had thrown up, and found myself mentally preparing to set out on another fact-finding mission.

I need to know what’s really going on with Sionne, and I have to find out fast if I want to get my revenge on her, I thought. Which means, if needs be, going to the Dark Elf Islands myself.

Extra Story: Creamy or Chunky?

“Creamy is way better than chunky!”

“That is demonstrably false. Chunky is clearly the better choice!”

After buying snacks from the dungeon shop on the bottom level of the Abyss, two of the four fairy maids were arguing about their purchases in their shared room. It was their day off, but truth be told, the maids would much rather have worked themselves to death for their master, Light—who was about to set off on yet another mission up to the surface world—than sit around all day.

But as Light had decreed that the maids *must* take breaks as part of a rotation, the quartet figured they’d while away their free time by chatting over some snacks. However, the conversation had taken an unexpectedly contentious turn when they’d started discussing their choice of snack food. All four maids had bought sweet red bean jam to eat, but the jam came in two varieties: smooth and creamy, or chunky with bits of slightly crushed beans in it.

“Chunky jam’s got all that skin that comes off the beans, and that stuff feels icky in my mouth,” said the maid who was extremely cute, but seemed to have no other personality. “So creamy jam is *obviously* better!”

“On the contrary, it is *precisely* that skin that makes the chunky jam superior to the palate,” the other maid retorted, pretentiously adjusting her glasses. “And furthermore, the skin adds nutritional value that you are unable to derive from creamy jam.”

“I think I’m in the creamy corner on this, yeah?” said the third maid, who looked and acted like an ultratrendy Japanese kogal—the type of person who phrases practically everything in the form of a question. “Like, you know how the skin sticks to the roof of your mouth even after you’re done eating that chunky stuff? Like, total barfsville, am I right?”

“Um, I like chunky jam,” said the fourth maid, who looked like a cute geek. “I-It feels like you’re actually e-eating something.”

The maids were deadlocked at two apiece on their preference for sweet bean jam. This didn’t sit well with Supercute, who pouted in frustration. “Fine! In that case, let’s go ask everyone which they think is better: creamy or chunky jam!”

“Indeed we should,” Glasses agreed. “We shall conduct a survey to see if people prefer *chunky* jam or creamy.”

Glasses had basically repeated Supercute's suggestion, but switched the options around so that her favored jam was mentioned first. Once this petty exchange had concluded, the four maids rushed out of their room to settle what might well be the most trivial bet known to man. Or any other creature, for that matter. The quartet's first interviewee was Aoyuki, who they happened to run into in the hallway.

"Miss Aoyuki?" Kogal said to get her attention. "Which do you like better: creamy or chunky jam?"

"Y-You must like chunky jam, I-I hope?" Geeky suggested hesitantly.

Aoyuki silently looked up at the maids, since they were all taller than her, though she hadn't seemed startled in the least when they'd started running toward her, because after all, they were Level 500, while Aoyuki was Level 9999. She literally had nothing to fear from them.

"Mew," Aoyuki eventually said by way of reply.

"Miss Aoyuki?" said Kogal, extending the last vowel like she always did.

"So, um, uh, we were wondering if y-you liked chunky jam or c-creamy jam..." Geeky tried again.

"Mreow," Aoyuki said, though this time, there was a slight but perceptible edge to her mewling, which Supercute immediately picked up on.

"Uh, of course," Supercute said, ending the conversation abruptly. Aoyuki wordlessly slunk away from the fairy maids, the brusque nature of her departure underlining that she had no further business with them. The quartet watched on in silence as the Genius Tamer sauntered off, the dangly bit of her oversized, belt-like collar swaying behind her.

"Should we have asked someone else, do you think?" Supercute said in hushed tones.

"I believe so," Glasses whispered back. "Miss Aoyuki can be rather peculiar at times."

Undeterred, the fairy maids set off to find another, more *responsive* interview subject, and their little jaunt ended up leading them to the dungeon's training grounds, where Ellie was seemingly experimenting with some new spells. They didn't waste any time asking her which type of bean jam she preferred, but her reply completely blindsided them.

"You're asking me if I like creamy or chunky *bean* jam?" Ellie said. "I simply can't wrap my head around how beans of all things can be made into a jam. Why would you even add sugar to beans in the first place?"

“Y-Y-You just blew my mind!” Geeky gasped.

“So you’re the one person in, like, the whole world who *doesn’t* like bean jam?” asked Kogal.

“Well, it’s all a matter of preference, I guess,” Ellie backtracked. “If you were to ask me if I like cakes, cookies, or pies, I’d tell you I love them, of course.” Ellie had started blushing the moment she’d realized she had said something that could only have come out of the mouth of a middle-aged woman who had outgrown sweets.

Knowing they weren’t going to get a satisfactory answer from Ellie, the maids took their leave and headed for the cafeteria. They thought they might find some other fairy maids on break there, which would make conducting a survey much easier. But the four had arrived either too late or too early, because when they got to the cafeteria, there was nobody in there except for Nazuna, who was eating a pancake with sweet bean filling. Although they were disappointed by how empty the room was, the four maids seized their opportunity to question someone about their bean jam preference.

“Miss Nazuna! Miss Nazuna!” Supercute called over to her.

“Which do you like better: creamy bean jam or chunky bean jam?”

“You must love chunky jam, correct?” Glasses pressed her as she resolutely adjusted her frames.

Although Nazuna was in the middle of eating her meal, she didn’t feel like the maids were bugging her, and readily replied to their questions with her usual bubblyness. “What’s ‘bean jam?’” she said.

“Uh, Miss Nazuna? You’re, like, literally eating it right now?” Kogal pointed out.

“A-And it *has* to be ch-ch-chunky bean jam, right?” asked Geeky.

Nazuna stared at the fairy maids for several expectant seconds before suddenly brightening up as if she had finally understood the question. She wolfed down the last of her red bean pancake and answered the maids with gusto. “Oh, *now* I get where yer coming from!”

“Yes, I’m glad you understand!” said Supercute.

“And we can safely assume your answer is chunky jam, yes, Miss Nazuna?” Glasses asked.

Nazuna chuckled. “Nope, it wasn’t chunky.”

“Then, it must have been creamy, yeah?” Kogal prompted.

“Because you have such awesome taste?”

“Nope, wrong again! It wasn’t creamy jam either,” a grinning Nazuna said as she washed down her snack with a carton of milk. “I wasn’t eating jam at all! It was red bean pancake! Ain’tcha ever tried ’em before? They’re my favorite!”

Nazuna had such a broad, innocent smile on her face, the four maids felt too guilty to say a word to the contrary.

“Ya should try the red bean pancakes if ya get the chance. Ya won’t regret it!” Nazuna declared as she got up to leave the cafeteria. “I guarantee you’ll love ’em!”

The maids didn’t even try to correct Nazuna’s misunderstanding. They just watched in silence as she strolled off.

“Miss Nazuna, uh, utterly amazes me sometimes,” Geeky said when she was finally out of earshot. “She really is o-one of a kind.” The other three maids nodded deeply in agreement.

Even though the quartet hadn’t managed to get a single useful answer to their short survey, they decided to head back to their room. Nazuna’s unfathomably clueless answer had been the final nail in the coffin that had sapped them of all motivation to continue. While en route to their room, they encountered Light being escorted by Iceheat in the hallway, and the fairy maids immediately lined up against the wall so they could gaze upon their beloved master as he passed. This chance meeting was such a treat for the four maids, their eyes twinkled with excitement.

Light noticed the maids and stopped in front of them. “Hold on. Aren’t all of you supposed to be on a day off today?”

“You remember who we are?” Supercute said, genuinely astonished by this.

Not only were there a multitude of fairy maids, they rarely came face-to-face with Light—or at least, not nearly as much as the head housekeeper, Mei, did. For a fairy maid, personal interactions with Light were basically limited to seeing him in the hallway, helping to change his clothes, or being his attendant on rotation (and those rotations were incredibly far apart, due to the sheer number of fairy maids). The fact that Light remembered their faces—and knew their work schedules to boot—completely floored the four maids. Of course, from Light’s perspective, it wasn’t that huge a deal. Light valued each and every one of his loyal allies, and felt it was the least he could do to remember their names and faces.

“Yes. And I thank you for cleaning, doing the laundry, and performing all the other chores you do,” Light said with a smile. “I’m sorry I’ve been too busy to tell you all how much I appreciate what you do. If we ever get the chance, we should all get together and chat.”

“O-O-Of course!” said Supercute. “We’d welcome it!”

“I-I will prepare the tastiest snacks for it like my life depends on it!” Glasses announced.

“A-And we’ll do, like, everything to serve you and all?” Kogal added.

“W-We also hope you take care of yourself, M-Master Light,” said Geeky.

“Right,” said Light. “Sorry, I have to go now. I still have lots to take care of. Let’s go, Iceheat.”

“Of course,” Iceheat said. Light strolled away with the red-and-blue-haired maid following a few steps behind. The four fairy maids watched the two go until they were out of sight.

Supercute exhaled loudly as if she’d been holding her breath the whole time. “I can’t believe we actually got to see Master Light, and that he even *spoke* to us!”

“We definitely must have used up all of our luck to be so blessed with that moment!” said Glasses.

“All of our luck? Are you kidding? We must’ve used up, like, several lifetimes worth of luck there!” Kogal insisted.

“W-W-Wait a minute,” Geeky jumped in. “What are we doing standing in the middle of the hallway on our d-day off again?”

“Hm? Good question,” said Supercute. “Master was so precious, I totally forgot!”

“Indeed. Our Master is undoubtedly precious and stan-worthy,” Glasses agreed.

“I know, right?” said Kogal. “Like, can Master Light *be* any more presh?”

“S-S-Since it’s our day off, how about we head back to our room and talk about how p-p-precious Master Light is!” Geeky suggested.

“I’m in!” said Supercute.

The four maids clean forgot about settling the question of which type of sweet bean jam was better, and following Geeky’s proposal, they spent the rest of the day and all through the night discussing exactly how “precious” their lord and master was.

Extra Story: Bathtime Mystery

“Ah, this feels incredible!” said Supercute.

“I agree, but the steam is fogging up my lenses,” Glasses grumbled.

“Aw, wow. My body’s, like, *this* close to melting, y’know?” said Kogal.

“N-Nothing beats a bath after a h-hard day’s work,” Geeky proclaimed.

The four fairy maids had finished their duties for the day, switched with the night shift, and once they’d eaten dinner, they all went for a soak in the largest bath in the women-only bathing area, which boasted several varieties of baths on top of the usual kind: milky salt baths, floating fruit baths, flower petal baths, plus showers and saunas. The fairy maids settled for just a regular bath, though. Not only was the Unlimited Gacha capable of producing hot water, many of Light’s summons could do so through magic too, so replacing the water every night was a trivial matter. Since there were a *lot* of women in the Abyss, Light had ordered the construction of this bathing area—which resembled a hot springs resort—as a perk for his allies. There was a men-only bathing area too, but it was nowhere near as big as the women-only part.

However, not everyone was fond of the baths, and Mera was the poster child for that particular contingent—though that didn’t mean Mera was forced to remain dirty and grimy, since there were a variety of ways to scrub up in the Abyss. For example, you could purchase the R Wash gacha card at the dungeon shop, which removed filth and any other impurities from your skin. But in any event, most people loved the baths, and that included the four fairy maids.

“Oh, hey, Miss Ellie and Miss Nazuna just came in,” Supercute pointed out.

“I can’t see through my fogged-up lenses,” Glasses said. Nazuna had indeed entered the bathing area—or rather, bounded through it completely uncovered with a towel dangling in one hand. “Yay! I love these baths! They feel awesome and I can really stretch my legs in ’em!”

“I know how you feel, but you need to come over here and scrub yourself first, Nazuna,” said Ellie, a towel covering her modesty.

“Oh, yeah! I almost forgot!” said Nazuna. “Thanks Ellie!”

“Honestly, you’re such a handful,” Ellie sighed as she dragged Nazuna by the arm to the washing area. It was a safe bet Ellie was going to take it upon herself to wash Nazuna’s hair and scrub her back too.

“Those two go so well together,” said Supercute.

“They both have p-perfect figures. T-Too perfect, even,” Geeky mumbled. “M-Miss Ellie has huge boobs a-and exquisite proportions, and Miss N-Nazuna might be short but she has big boobs too. I-I-It’s just not fair!”

“I know, right?” Kogal agreed. “It’s like, you can’t help falling in love with their bodies despite being the same sex, yeah?”

“Meeow,” Aoyuki purred as she entered the bathing area, and it was almost as if she had timed her arrival to coincide with Ellie keeping Nazuna busy with her scrub-down. Nazuna noticed Aoyuki and attempted to run over to her diminutive associate, but Ellie promptly sat the Vampire Knight back down on the bath stool.

“You still have suds all over you. You could slip and fall,” Ellie admonished her. “You also haven’t washed behind your ears yet. You need to be *fully* clean before you go for a soak in the water.”

“I *know* that, Ellie. Why’re ya always so fussy?” said Nazuna.

Witnessing this scene out of the corner of her eye, Aoyuki breathed a faint sigh of relief and headed for the shower area, practically skating across the floor with a triumphant grin on her face.

“On the other hand, it looks like Miss Aoyuki does all she can to avoid Miss Nazuna,” whispered Supercute.

“If you ask me, Miss Nazuna’s pestering of Miss Aoyuki is excessive,” Glasses opined. “Cats are known to turn against people who shower them with too much physical affection.”

Kogal unexpectedly saw eye to eye with Glasses on this one.

“Right? I think I know what you mean? Like, Miss Nazuna’s nice and all, but she’s a lot easier to handle in smaller doses, yeah?”

“B-But I can see why Miss Nazuna l-l-likes Miss Aoyuki so much,” said Geeky. “Miss Aoyuki is incre-incredibly cute, and she’s as slender as a p-p-pixie.”

The other three maids nodded vigorously at this, their four pairs of eyes following Aoyuki as she sauntered over to a shower stall. At the same moment that Aoyuki entered the stall, Suzu exited a neighboring one, droplets of water glistening on her velvety black hair and dangling from her long, feathery eyelashes.

Suzu was well known throughout the Abyss for her fondness for bathing. It was also common knowledge that Suzu was classed as “intersex,” which made people wonder how she looked below the belt. In other words, how exactly did the UR Double Gunner Suzu double as both a male and a female? Nobody—not even Light—knew the answer

to that question.

The four fairy maids trained their sights on Suzu's lower half, but the musketeer had come out of the shower stall with a towel wrapped tightly around herself from her bust to her knees.

"Miss Suzu definitely looks slender in that towel," Supercute noted. "And I can tell she's got a pretty big chest too."

"Regrettably, my lenses are too fogged up to see," Glasses said glumly.

"Plus her skin's all creamy and junk? Makes you green with envy, doesn't it?" said Kogal.

"B-B-But Miss Suzu looks sort of flushed after taking her shower," said Geeky. "That reddish g-glow makes her look so hot and sexy."

Even though the fairy maids kept their gaze firmly fixed on Suzu's lower half, the gunner didn't notice the eyes on her and headed straight for a mineral bath with water that was milky white and conveniently opaque. While Suzu did take off her towel before settling down in the water, she entered in a way that meant she didn't expose her private parts to any onlookers.

"I-I wonder what Miss Suzu looks like d-d-down there," Geeky mused, echoing the thoughts of the others.

"She didn't bring her weapon in here, did she?" Supercute pointed out.

"We could go join her in that bath and talk up a storm until she gets dizzy from the heat and has to get up to leave," said Glasses.

"So we'd be solving a years-long mystery, you mean?" said Kogal. "And that wouldn't be, like, y'know, dirty or anything. We're just super curious about her, is all, yeah?"

All four fairy maids looked at each other and wordlessly stood up in their bath with the intention of relocating to Suzu's mineral bath. Although the musketeer was Level 7777, it was unlikely she was capable of wrapping a towel around her fast enough to deny the maids a fleeting glimpse of her most intimate area, especially as there would be four pairs of eyes watching Suzu like a hawk to ensure no detail could be missed. The plan was flawless, with absolutely no drawbacks. Well, except for two.

"Ladies, what kind of ridiculous stunt are you planning?"

The four maids spun on their heels and yelped in surprise. "Miss Mei?! Miss Iceheat?!"

Mei, the head housekeeper, had been the one who had surprised the maids with her verbal reprimand, and standing beside her was Iceheat, the supervising housekeeper responsible for escorting Light places. Both women were holding towels in front of their gorgeous bodies to discreetly conceal them from view.

“M-Miss Mei! How long have you been standing there?” Supercute asked.

“Did you hear, like, everything we said just now?” Kogal said.

“We came out of the sauna and caught you four in the act,” Mei replied. “This space is for everyone to relax in peace. We cannot have you engaging in such offensive behavior.”

“B-B-B-But we were only trying to be friends with Miss Suzu,” Geeky protested. “I-I-I don’t think we were doing anything *wrong*.”

This flimsy alibi caused Iceheat to press her fingers to her temple. “Why must you maids always give in to your most craven urges? And you never cease with your off-color prattle, even when Master Light is within earshot. Perhaps I, myself, should put in a recommendation that we take a more *disciplinary* approach with you maids.”



“P-Please don’t hurt us!” Supercute begged.

“You shouldn’t be so quick to resort to violence, Miss Iceheat,” Glasses moaned. “What would you do if you broke my glasses?”

“So, like, I totally agree with the ‘no violence’ thing, yeah?” said Kogal.

“Y-Y-You should be more gentle to us junior maids! We’re too d-d-delicate to be punished!” Geeky protested.

“You incorrigible little...” The veins on Iceheat’s forehead were pulsating as she balled up her hands into fists, but before she could do anything, Mei held up her hand to simmer everyone down.

“If you ladies *insist* on disrupting the peace and comfort this communal space offers, I shall be forced to punish the four of you,” Mei stated.

“Punish?” the four maids practically yelled, looking from one to the other as they conducted a silent conversation between themselves.

What’s she going to do to punish us? Supercute thought. *Take away our days off?*

If that’s true, she’s only threatening us with a good time, Glasses thought in response. *I’d gladly work myself to death for Master Light.*

So we’ll know Suzu’s secret and get to work even harder for Master Light? Kogal thought, continuing the thread of the unspoken conversation. *That’d be killing two birds with one stone, obviously?*

Wh-Who knew getting punished would be th-this sweet?! Geeky thought excitedly. *We hit the j-j-jackpot!*

The maids clearly saw no reason to be contrite about their actions, which caused Mei to sigh before continuing where she’d left off. “If you insist on carrying out what you had planned, then you will all be permanently banned from personally attending Master Light. Is that what you want?”

The four fairy maids immediately dropped to their knees and prostrated themselves before Mei. “Please forgive us!” they all said in unison.

Iceheat was thoroughly impressed with this outcome. “I can’t believe how swiftly you corrected their behavior, Miss Mei. You’re such an amazing leader!”

Although Mei welcomed Iceheat’s compliment, the shameless speed of the complete one-eighty in the four maids’ behavior made Mei’s head pound.

“I wonder where I went wrong in training these maids...” Mei asked herself. “Is there something wrong with my maid’s code?”

While Mei was busy second-guessing her management skills, Suzu—the subject of this conversation—rose from her very refreshing mineral bath and strolled out of the women-only bathing area, making

sure that nobody had a chance to steal a glimpse at her naked body.

Extra Story: Nemumu's Tales from the Surface World

After weeks of serving as a bodyguard for Light while he was up on the surface world being an adventurer, Nemumu returned to the Abyss. On her return, she took a day off from her assigned duties and decided to spend some of her free time in the dungeon cafeteria. There, she found herself surrounded by four fairy maids who were all pressing her for details on her experiences questing with Light.

"Miss Nemumu, did you sleep in Master Light's tent?" one fairy maid asked.

"I did, as it happens," said Nemumu. "I personally didn't think it was appropriate for me to sleep in the same tent as Lord Light, but he insisted that Gold and I 'train' to be adventurers, since we had no experience of camping outdoors, so Gold and I took turns sleeping in Lord Light's tent while the other kept watch."

"I-I-I'm so jealous! How can you be so *lucky*?!" another fairy maid piped up.

Light had needed to return to the Abyss to take care of some paperwork that required his attention, so Nemumu and Gold had seized this opportunity to take the day off from questing. Gold had stayed up on the surface world to visit a few taverns, while Nemumu had chosen to return to the Abyss. Needless to say, this was because Nemumu wanted to stay with Light for as long as possible, but on top of that, the Abyss offered much better recreational options than anything she could find on the surface world. Down here, she could dine on the finest cuisine, buy snacks you just couldn't get on the surface, bathe in the spacious hot spring-like bathing area, and sleep in a luxurious bed. And she could do all of these things without worrying about people staring at her. In fact, things were so much better down here in the Abyss, Nemumu couldn't understand what Gold found so attractive about the taverns up on the surface.

That was why Nemumu presently found herself talking about Light with a bunch of fairy maids at a cafeteria table. All of them were drinking tea, and Nemumu airily brushed back her platinum hair as the maids tried to draw more tales about the master they all adored out of her.

"So when you talk about the 'camping experience,' does that include serving Master Light food that you prepared?" asked a

bespectacled maid, who kept pushing her frames up the bridge of her nose as she spoke.

“Pfft!” Nemumu caught herself giggling unexpectedly at the maid’s perfectly innocent question, and after a pregnant pause, she answered with an unmistakably smug look on her face. “Actually, I was the one who had the honor of eating meals made by Lord Light, which he enjoyed cooking since he doesn’t usually prepare food himself.”

“Wow, that’s, like, too perfect?” the fourth fairy maid said. “So how do Master Light’s meals taste, anyways?”

“They were absolutely sublime, of course,” Nemumu said. “Nothing will ever beat Lord Light’s soup made from dried meat and bread—not even food served by the gods themselves!”

As Nemumu hinted at, the meals Light made were the most basic affairs. Back when Light quested with the Concord of the Tribes, he’d been assigned to perform various miscellaneous duties for the party, which included cooking meals whenever they set up camp. Now that Light was leading the Black Fools, he’d once again taken it upon himself to cook the food for his party, since the task reminded him of the good old days, before he was betrayed.

The meal Light liked to cook was nothing special: just some dried meat mixed with wild vegetables boiled up in a pot, with some hardtack bread thrown in to thicken it up. This “campers’ hotpot” actually tasted worse than the most basic of food items you could find in the Abyss, but for those who practically worshipped the ground Light walked on, any food made by his hand was more valuable than gold.

“Nemumu, I’m so jealous,” said the first maid.

“I really wish we could eat these meals Master Light makes from scratch,” the glasses-wearing maid added.

“Seriously, I could eat his food, like, now even?” said the maid who had a bad habit of phrasing everything like a question.

“I-I-I wouldn’t eat Master’s food,” said the maid who had a tendency to stumble over her words. “I’d p-p-preserve it so I could k-keep it forever.”

“I’m sure you’ll all get a chance to taste his food,” Nemumu reassured them. “*After* me, of course!”

Nemumu was clearly enjoying being showered with all this attention. All of a sudden, a series of sharp, grating laughs echoed around the cafeteria, spoiling the mood.

“Count me in on this jealousy train!” crowed Mera, who had appeared at their table without warning, drawing looks of confusion from Nemumu and the four maids. “I mean, you get to sleep with Master all nice and cozy in the same tent. Not to mention, you also get

to go shopping with him, quest with him, and even eat food he's made with his own two hands."

The chimera towered over the other girls, and she was smiling almost literally from ear to ear with her jagged, sharklike teeth bared. Not only was Mera two meters tall, her Level 7777 stats dwarfed everyone else at the table. Mera cackled again, which only added to the air of intimidation she exuded.

"I can transform into a scout that's as good as anyone," Mera stated. "So I'd *really* appreciate it if you switched places with me, Nemumu."

To underline her words, tentacles and oversized eyeballs on stalks slithered out of her wide sleeves. Since Mera was a chimera, she could transform into anything she wanted—a trait that made Mera extremely incompatible with an assassin like Nemumu. Mera also gave off the impression that she was seconds away from devouring you whole from head to toe, which Nemumu found somewhat off-putting.

"L-Lord Light was the one who chose me, so I'm in no position to —" Nemumu replied.

Mera interrupted by chortling again. "You don't have to explain yourself. I get it. Doesn't change the fact that I'm green with envy. So what I'm gonna need you to do is to *personally* put in a good word with Master for me."

"What?!" Nemumu cried, her face stiffening. "You want *me* to say something to him?!" The Assassin's Blade then sensed that there was another pair of eyes trained on her.

"If that's how it is, my partner says she would make a pretty good scout, so if you're going to recommend anyone, it should be her," an unnaturally disembodied voice jumped in.

"Y-You too, Miss Suzu?!" Nemumu spluttered. The musketeer had come over to the table holding her gun, Lock, who did all the speaking for her while she just stood there in shy silence. Suzu usually ate alone in a corner of the cafeteria, but on this rare occasion, she had mustered up the courage to join in on the conversation, with Lock acting as her interlocutor. This showed just how much she wanted to go questing with Light up on the surface.

Mera screeched with laughter. "Easy there, Suzu. That's not fair, you cutting in line. I was the one who asked first, sweetie."

Feeling more than a hint of trepidation, Suzu held her tongue, so Lock spoke in her stead. "She says she's the better choice abilitywise, and—hey, don't glare at me like that!"

What had started off as a nice, enjoyable chat over tea had turned into a tense face-off between two Level 7777 warriors, prompting the four fearful Level 500 maids to hide behind the Level 5000 Nemumu. Though if a fight *did* break out between Suzu and Mera, no one would

be able to break it up. In fact, it was doubtful Nemumu would even be able to protect the fairy maids all that well if bullets and tentacles started flying.

Th-This is bad, thought Nemumu. *And it's all because I got too carried away boasting in front of the maids. I never thought this would happen! In fact, I don't think anyone could've predicted this disaster!*

Mera cackled evilly as her eyes flashed red, but Suzu simply stared back at her in defiant silence. It was up to Lock to try to de-escalate the situation. “H-Hey, you two need to get a hold of yourselves! You’ll make a huge mess if you start whaling on each other in here!” But Suzu and Mera ignored the talking musket completely, and they were just about to go at it hammer and tongs when a familiar voice stopped them in their tracks.

“All right, you guys, break it up. This is no place for a fight.”

“Master Light!” several voices cried out as one, and everyone in the room flung themselves to the floor and prostrated themselves before the lord of the dungeon. Now completely used to these showy displays of subservience, Light instructed his allies to raise their heads. Iceheat—who was standing behind Light and acting as his bodyguard—scowled at Mera and Suzu.

Light chuckled sheepishly at Iceheat’s reaction before turning to the two offenders. “Mera, Suzu, I’m flattered that you want to come questing with me, but the two of you are just too powerful to take up to the surface world. I’m sorry about that.”

Mera threw back her head and laughed. “No worries, Master. It’s my fault for getting so hotheaded. Please accept my apologies.”

“My partner says she feels bad for what just happened,” Lock jumped in, speaking on behalf of a clearly chastened Suzu.

“Thanks, you guys. I really appreciate it,” said Light. “Since we’re all here on break, why don’t we have ourselves some snacks, hm?”

Everybody cheerfully agreed to Light’s proposal, and as they all got to their feet to go find some snacks, they started discussing what they were going to get. Nemumu inched her way closer to Light, and made a small vow to herself as she walked behind him. *Next time, I’ll try to be a little more discreet when discussing my time with Lord Light,* she thought to herself. *I don’t think I’d survive a repeat of what nearly happened back there, and nor would my stomach lining.*

Afterword

Hello, Meikyou Shisui here. I'd like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for reading and/or purchasing *Unlimited Gacha*. What's more, we've reached the milestone of the second volume getting published! Once again, this could never have happened without the support of you, the loyal readers, and I cannot thank you all enough!

In this volume, not only does Light get his revenge on one of his former Concord of the Tribes partymates, he also takes on an entire nation. That nation is of course the Elven Queendom, and the target of his revenge is Sasha. The story you'll find in this volume is a version of the Elven Queendom Arc featured in the web novel series originally published on *Shosetsuka ni Naro* ("Let's Become a Novelist"), the website operated by HinaProject Inc.

The Level 7777 characters, Suzu, Mera, and Iceheat all first appeared in the *Unlimited Gacha* web novel, but this light novel version expands the cast of allies and foes, and adds scenes that weren't in the web novel. The new scenes include a whole bunch of battle sequences, lighthearted dialogue, revenge set pieces, and more! I worked hard to ensure that those who have already read the *Naro* version can enjoy this book version every bit as much as newcomers to the series. Nothing would make me happier than you getting at least some enjoyment out of reading this volume.

Now, I wish to express my thanks to everyone involved in the creation of this volume. I'll start off with the light novel's illustrator: tef! Once again, I wish to thank you for your amazing color and black-and-white illustrations, and for contributing an abundance of character designs. Your illustrations make the characters look several times more awesome than how I personally would've imagined them. I'm so struck by how cute and stylish you draw the characters, and seeing the art is always a breathtaking experience (*laughs*). I look forward to checking out tef's wonderful illustrations and character designs in future volumes too!

Next to thank is HJ Novels' editorial team for once again giving me a home to write my *Unlimited Gacha* light novel! I'm truly sorry for all the trouble I've caused you all during this volume too! I believe I'll continue to inconvenience you in the future, so I hope we'll maintain our great working relationship going forward.

I also wish to thank Takashi Ohmae for authoring a high-quality manga version of *Unlimited Gacha* for the *Magazine Pocket* app! I receive early drafts of the manga chapters to review prior to publishing, and the material I get contains such superior art and staging that I often find myself reading the drafts more for my own personal enjoyment than for actually writing up supervisory notes! Thank you very much for drawing such wonderful manga pages every week!

I would also like to express my gratitude for Kodansha's *Magazine Pocket* and the editorial team that has given the *Unlimited Gacha* manga a home. Thank you for publishing such an outstanding manga and I appreciate your kind cooperation going forward!

Last of all, I would like to acknowledge all of you reading this for picking up *Unlimited Gacha*! Thanks to everyone's support, I was able to write this novel, which is the best thing that could've ever happened to this author! For what it's worth, I wish to return the favor by putting every effort into my writing, so I look forward to your continued support.

PS: Just like in the last volume, I have written a bonus story that is available to everyone who purchased this novel. To access the bonus story, go to my activity updates on the *Naro* website, click on the entry which has a date of or around August 19, 2021, and follow the instructions in the entry. You will be directed to my personal web page, where you will need to enter a password. (You can also do a web search for “明鏡シスイ 活動報告 (Meikyou Shisui Activity Update)” and that should take you straight to the right web page. Once there, search for the entry that corresponds to the date above. Also, the password to my personal website changes with every volume of the novel that's released, so please bear that in mind. When you have logged in, you should also be able to read past bonus stories.)

The password for this volume is: **aoyuki**. [Please note: As of this English-language publication, this password has expired.]



"So how
are things on
your end?"

"Mrroww."

Backstabbed in a **Backwater Dungeon**:

My Trusted **Companions** Tried to **Kill** Me, But Thanks to the **Gift** of an

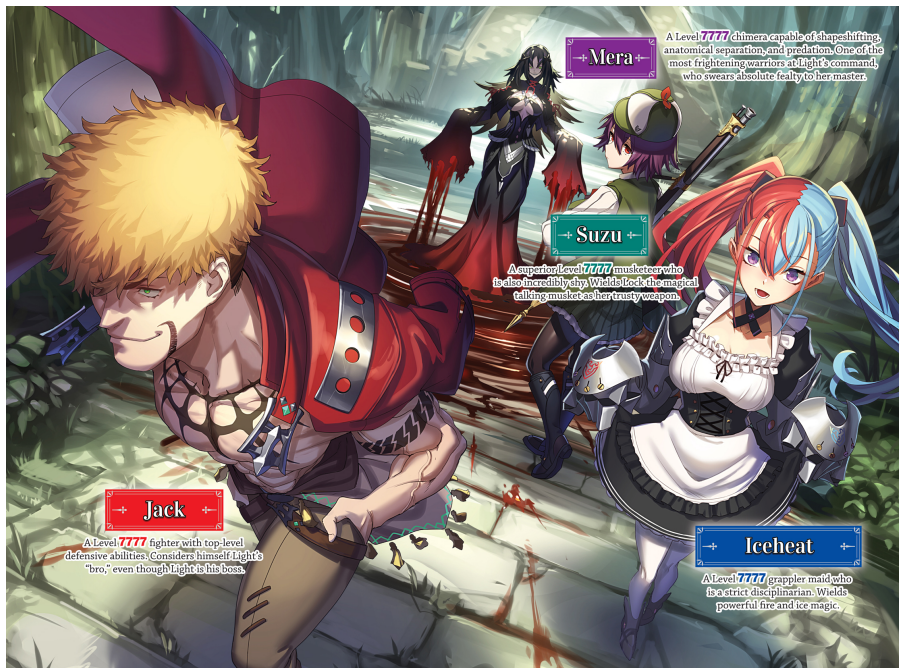
UNLIMITED **GACHA**

I Got **LVL 9999**

Friends and Am Out For **Revenge**
on My **Former** Party Members

and the **World**

VOL. **2**



The youth finally
removed his mask.

**"I'll say it again:
it's been a while, Sasha."**

Sasha let out a hoarse,
gut-wrenching scream.

"A-Aaaaaaaah!"



Bonus Short Story

How to Be a Bro

Five Mohawks with an assortment of weapons in their hands were facing off against a single unarmed man in the bottom level of the Abyss. The Mohawks would usually be up on the surface, operating as adventurers and collecting intelligence for their dungeon master, Light, but they were presently entirely focused on the task of taking down UR Level 7777, Ironblooded Barricade, Jack.

Standing at nearly two meters tall with a lean yet muscular build, and shirtless save for a coat he wore like a cape, Jack faced off against the five armed Mohawks who were ready to rough him up, though his lack of weaponry compared to them didn't seem to bother him in the slightest. His calmness stemmed from the fact that the Mohawks had power levels between 20 and 25, while Jack's own power level was up in the high quadruple digits. Even if a hundred Mohawks ganged up on Jack, they'd never be able to beat him in a fight. But despite these unfavorable odds, the five Mohawks were determined to put the hurt on Jack.

One of the Mohawks shrieked a battle cry. "You're dead, man!" he yelled as he swung a large hatchet at Jack's skull with all his might, but since the weapon had a short reach, his attack was somewhat telegraphed, due to him having to get in close to be within striking range. This allowed Jack to easily sidestep the Mohawk's attack, and the hatchet went slicing through empty air.

"Ya gotta be quicker than that, bro! But ya got good spirit."

"Hells yeah! Caught ya slippin'!"

"It's on now, bitch!"

Two more Mohawks flung themselves at Jack the moment he dodged the first attack. One of the Mohawks swung around a long chain with the intent of lassoing Jack's arm and immobilizing him that way, while the other rushed forward with his spiked club raised. At the same time, a third Mohawk positioned behind his allies fired off a crossbow bolt aimed at Jack's vital organs.

"Good aim, bros! Solid team play too!" Jack called out as he brought around his left hand to lazily swat away the chain, parried the club with his right, then whipped his left hand around again to catch the crossbow bolt between his fingers. In spite of how it looked, Jack had been going easy on the Mohawks, but his lightning-fast

reflexes still managed to cause the Mohawks wielding the club and the chain to stumble past their intended target.

“Your teamwork’s solid, but the pattern of your attacks is too basic, my bros,” Jack stated. “And I dunno what’s going on with you guys, but none of you yelled anywhere *near* loud enough when you attacked me. You dudes scared of me or somethin’? Ya gotta be heard when you’re fighting, bros. Ya gotta use your voices to fire up your crew. Plus, screaming at the top of your lungs takes the edge off your nerves too, ya feel me?”

“And you, Bolt Bro,” Jack said, singling out the Mohawk with the crossbow. “You practically broadcast the exact second you were gonna shoot. It was like you *wanted* me to duck out of the way so you’d miss. You gotta tighten up on your team play and use your own guys as cover, or at least move about a bit more to confuse me. Or better yet, *you* act as the distraction so your amigos can get a hit in on me. Ya gotta think, bro. Use your head.”

Jack turned his attention to the red-haired leader of the Mohawks, who was waiting on standby at the rear of the group. “You’ve been watching and barking instructions this whole time, haven’t ya? If things get too hot to handle, you can always take out your Gacha card and bail. A good boss always stands by and observes instead of joinin’ the brawl to make sure his guys stay safe, so good on you, Leader Bro. It’s always harder to know when to back down than to fight, so always keep that in mind, y’hear?”

“Thank you very much, Big Jack!” the red-haired leader said as he bent at the waist and bowed deeply.

Jack hadn’t really been fighting the Mohawks seriously, because if he had, he would’ve massacred them in a second. No, he was sparring with the adventurers in the dungeon’s training grounds with the goal of getting them more battle-ready for the surface world. The Mohawks had briefly returned to the Abyss to take care of a few errands, and they were using this opportunity to do some training with Jack.

Normally, a fighter of Jack’s caliber would see no value in training with the Mohawks, because a higher-level warrior like him would need to spend most of their time focusing on holding back, as if they were moving around in a room full of glass figurines. The sheer difference in power levels would also mean the elite fighter would likely have no idea where to even begin giving pointers, since their trainees would seem like really poor combatants in every single way. Jack was different, however. He realized he could easily withstand all the hits and projectiles the Mohawks could hurl his way, which made him the perfect sparring partner for them. The Mohawks did have a Teleportation card on them at all times in case they needed to get out of a jam, but it was no guarantee against unexpected battle fatalities

on the surface world. So Jack made a point of training with the Mohawks so they could hone their combat skills.

Of course, the other high-level summons didn't want to see the Mohawks die on the field of battle either, so they'd occasionally lend a hand or even do some coaching themselves if they had time to spare. On the other hand, some of the superwarriors were simply ill-suited to be trainers. Suzu, for one, was too shy to communicate combat instructions. And as for Nazuna... Well, to put it charitably, her pointers required a *deeper* level of understanding to fully grasp.

Jack clapped his hands to get the Mohawks' attention. "All right, brahs, let's go again. Remember what I told ya, and make sure I can actually *hear* you goons this time!"

"Thanks for training us, Big Jack!" the Mohawks said as one, their voices echoing loudly around the training grounds.



When they'd finished sparring, Jack and the Mohawks decided to hit the cafeteria, which was empty since it was already too late for lunch by the time they were done with their session, but still too early for dinner. Even so, the Mohawks had already showered and resculpted their hairdos after their little workout, and nobody wanted to wait until dinnertime to eat, so the six men went ahead and had a meal by themselves.

"Jack, thanks again for training with us today, brother," said one of the Mohawks.

"Amen to that. We always learn a thing or two from ya, man," another piped up.

"We ain't even jokin'. The teamwork you've been beating into us has boosted our rep way beyond what we could manage otherwise with our bog-standard power levels."

"Ain't no coach like Big Jack. Am I right, fellas?"

"Damn straight!" one of the Mohawks agreed. "And thanks for treatin' us to all this grub, big dog!"

"Don't even sweat it, my dudes," Jack said magnanimously. "Takin' care of your training *and* your stomachs is what a real bro does."

The Mohawks continued to shower Jack with sincere praise as they ate and drank beer at one of the cafeteria tables, even though it was still daytime. Still shirtless and looking totally ripped, Jack was seated in the middle of this group of guys with Mohican-style haircuts and dark sunglasses. If a stranger had stumbled across this sight, nobody could've blamed them for assuming they were a bunch of underworld thugs having a booze blowout.

Jack raised his mug to his lips and took a somewhat sullen swig of

his beer. "It sucks that this is all I can do for you, bros. Because of my level, I can't go up on the surface too often, but I really do wanna join you guys, believe me. Then again, I can't go around holding your hands all the time, can I? A real bro's gotta believe in his bros and let them fly."

Hearing Jack opening up like this made the Mohawks weep behind their sunglasses, and in some cases, made their noses run. "How the hell do you care so much about us, Big Jack?" one sniffed.

Jack cheerily tried to rouse the blubbering Mohawks. "Aw, c'mon, bros! We only get to do this kinda thing once in a blue moon! Forget all that sad talk! Pig out and drink up 'cause everything's on me! I know you dudes never get a spread as fancy as this up on the surface."

Little did Jack and the Mohawks know, the cafeteria had just that minute become a little less empty. The room suddenly filled with a barrage of screeching laughter that sounded like they were being made by some demonic crow.

"You're *just* my kind of man, darling!" said Mera, who was the source of the laughter. "So are you gonna treat us to some of that food or what?"

Jack spun in his chair to see that Mera and Iceheat had entered the cafeteria. He didn't know if they'd come here on their breaks or not, but it was clear from what she'd said that Mera had overheard Jack's little pep talk and was now angling for a free meal. But Iceheat, ever the straight arrow, wasn't going to stand for these sorts of shenanigans.

"No, Mera, let's *not* crash their little get-together," Iceheat said. "We apologize for interrupting you, Jack. We only came here for some tea, and I, Iceheat, promise we will be out of your hair in short order."

Jack guffawed at Iceheat's stuffy apology. "I'm totally cool with it, Iceheat. Totally cool. In fact, you two should *absolutely* get in on this! You're my broskis too, so we oughta take this chance to eat, drink, and party like bros!"

Cackling like a banshee, Mera grabbed a beer bottle and started chugging. "You're sweet, Jack. I like your style. Too bad I don't recall ever becoming your quote-unquote 'broski.'"

"Likewise," Iceheat agreed. "But you're right. This is as good an opportunity as any for us Level 7777 retainers to bond and converse."

"Now you're talking my language!" said Jack. "And you too, Suzu! Since you're here now, you gotta join the party too, bro!"

Suzu goggled at Jack in distraught silence. She had only shown up in the cafeteria to buy a snack since she was feeling a little hungry, and had no intention of eating it in the dining area. Suzu had already known beforehand that Jack and his buddies were in the cafeteria, and judging from the conversation she'd overheard, he was almost

certainly going to invite her to join them. To avoid that outcome, Suzu had been determined to dart into the cafeteria and out again as inconspicuously as possible, but unfortunately for the gunner, Jack had spotted her before she'd even had the chance to go into stealth mode, and called her over. She was now faced with the very uncomfortable prospect of joining a raucous before-dinner party. Lock—the musket Suzu was holding in her hands—tried to coax her into going and fraternizing with her dungeonmates.

“Look, I totally get how a complete loner like you can’t stand the thought of eating at the cool kids’ table, but they’d really like your company, and it won’t kill you just to sit there and—hey! Don’t bang me against the wall just because the truth hurts!”

While Suzu was angrily and tearfully punishing her talking musket for saying something that hit too close to home, Mera crept up to the gunner, grabbed her by the arm, and almost forcibly dragged her to the table. At that moment, Gold also showed up, the merriment having drawn him to the cafeteria, and the addition of the famous barhopper ratcheted up the temperature of the shindig by several degrees. All the while, Jack was working overtime to keep the party going, clearly enjoying the camaraderie on show from the bottom of his heart.

“Come on, Suzu, eat up, bro! I know you’re hungry,” Jack called out. “Mera, Iceheat, you bros drinking or what? Gold, broseph, you chow down like a boss! All right, bros. Tonight, we’re gonna drink ourselves stupid, y’hear?”



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by Meikyou Shisui

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